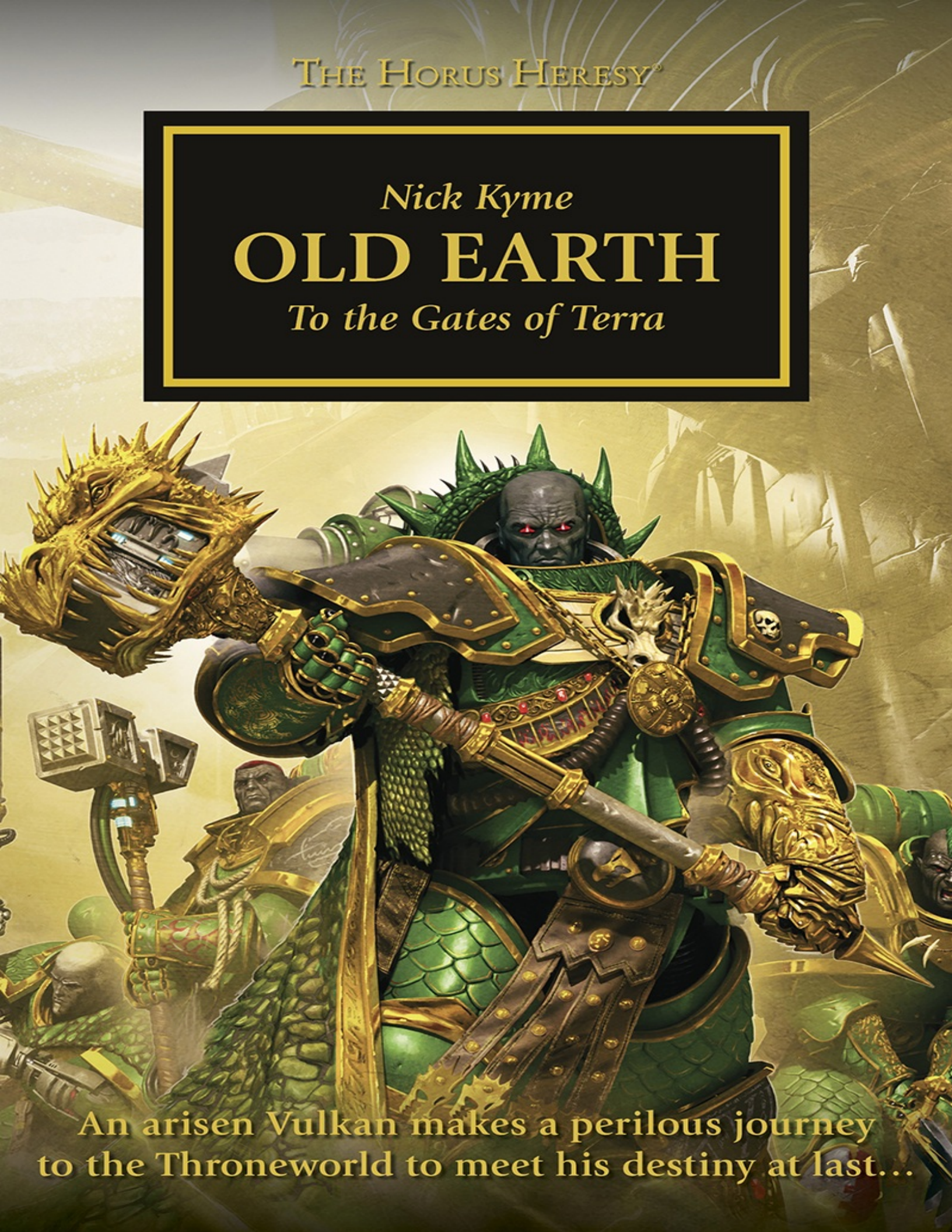
THE HORUS HERESY®

Nick Kyme

OLD EARTH

To the Gates of Terra



An arisen Vulkan makes a perilous journey to the Throneworld to meet his destiny at last…

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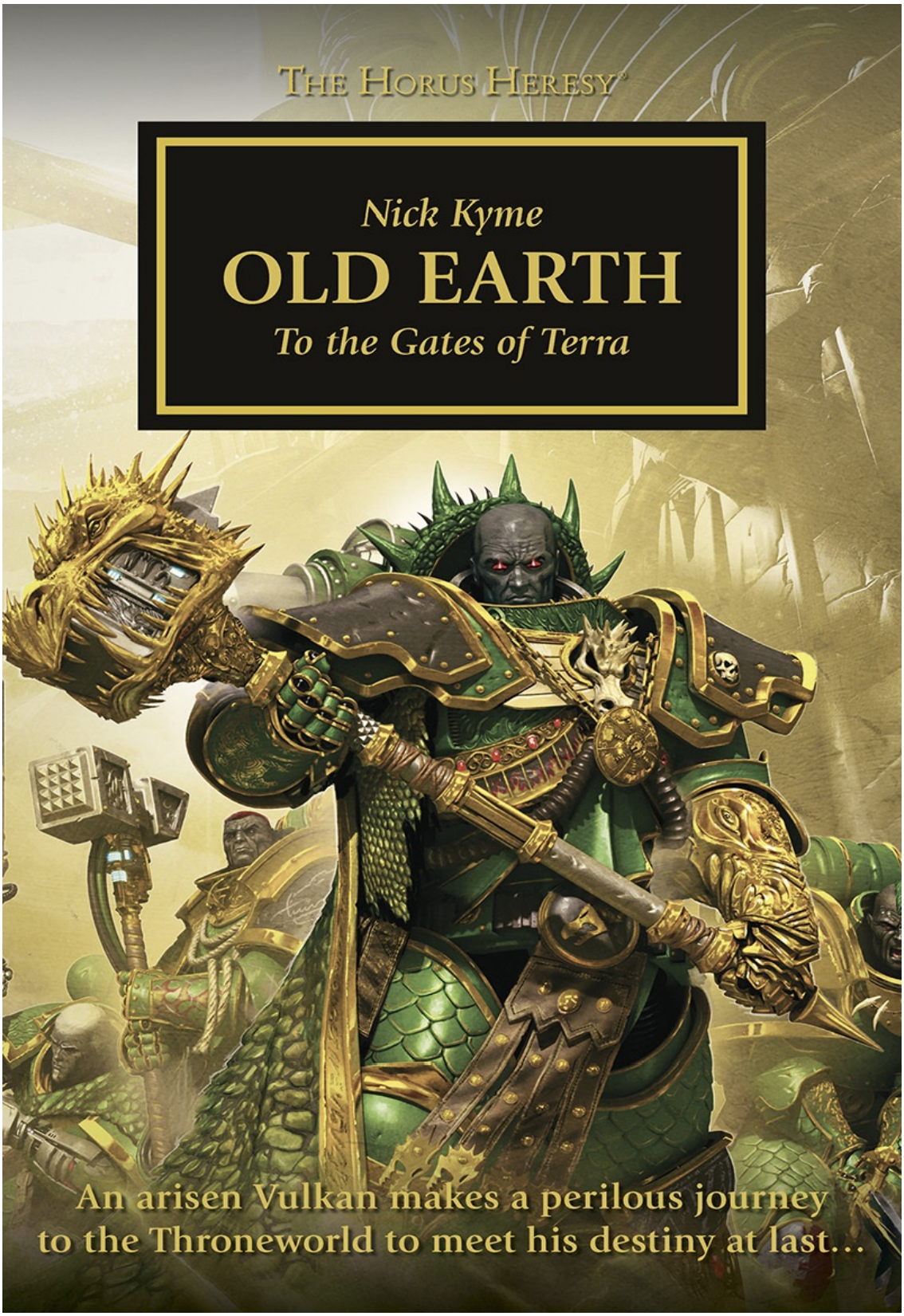
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OLD EARTH
To the Gates of Terra
An arisen Vulkan makes a perilous journey
to the Throneworld to meet his destiny at last…

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THE HORUS HERESY®

Nick Kyme

OLD EARTH

To the Gates of Terra

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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Isstvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended.
The Age of Darkness has begun.

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

Terra

The Emperor
Malcador the Sigillite

The XVIII Legion, 'Salamanders'

Vulkan, Lord of Drakes, primarch
Atok Abidemi, Draaksward
Barek Zytos, Draaksward
Igen Gargo, Draaksward
Nuros, Ally of Shadrak Meduson

The X Legion, 'Iron Hands'

Shadrak Meduson, Warleader of the Iron Tenth
Jebez Aug, Iron Father, Hand Elect to the Warleader
Goran Gorgonson, Apothecary of Clan Lokopt
Lumak, Captain of Clan Avernii
Mechosa, Captain of Clan Sorrgol
Arkul Theld, Captain of Clan Ungavaar
Kuleg Rawt, Iron Father of Clan Raukaan
Naduul Norsson, Iron Father of Clan Atraxii
Raask Arkborne, Iron Father of Clan Felg
Kernag, Iron Father of Clan Garrsak
Autek Mor, Iron Father of Clan Morragul

The XIX Legion, 'Raven Guard'

DALCOTH, Captain
KAYLAR NORN, Apothecary

The VII Legion, 'Imperial Fists'

ROGAL DORN, Primarch
ARCHAMUS, Huscarl

The XVI Legion, 'Sons of Horus'

TYBALT MARR, Captain
CYON AZEDINE, Company champion
KYSEN SCYBALE, Sergeant

The XVII Legion, 'Word Bearers'

BARTHUSA NAREK, Vigilator

Adeptus Arbites

VOHAN GETHE, Warden-Primus of the 87th, precinct 'Peacemakers'
EBBA RENSKI, Proctor

Eldar

ELDRAD ULTHRAN, Farseer of Ulthwé
SLAU DHA, Autarch, member of the Cabal

Others

CARTUR UMENEDIES, Imperial Judge
DAMON PRYTANIS, Immortal, operative of the Cabal
JOHN GRAMMATICUS, Immortal, operative of the Cabal
AGHALBOR, Greater daemon of Nurgle, the Bringer of Poxes
GAHET, Member of the Cabal
KHERADRUAKH, Shade stalker of the shadowed path

PROLOGUE

The lightning shard, broken

Fever stained the air and made it sour.

It was fear that had turned the mobs rabid. Fear that had burned down the buildings. Fear that had usurped law and order, and turned kin against kin.

Of him. Of his coming.

The seer heard bells as he trod softly through streets made black by the soot of urgent manufacture. The great war machine churned here, as it did across every human world in this beleaguered galaxy, swallowing lives and spitting out bullets in return. Discordant and loud, the bells whipped up a clangour that set teeth on edge and nerves fraying. They did not preach religion, for religion was dead. Their sound prophesied doom, and it echoed through the warren, through the hanging corpses, through the ruins of the township, invigorating further acts of violence and despair.

'The end has come! He is upon us!' a doomsayer wailed, as he shuffled into the seer's path. The poor wretch had a bullet caster's garb. His fingertips were dark from his labours, but he had given all that up to embrace despair instead.

'He has come!'

Spittle sprayed from the froth accumulating on the man's bottom lip. His eyes widened as his fervour grew.

One of the seer's retinue stepped forwards to kill the doomsayer, but the seer raised a hand to stop him.

'They are barbarians, no better than animals,' uttered the warrior with undisguised contempt.

'Perhaps,' replied the seer, 'but they are merely afraid. Don't you ever feel afraid, exarch?'

Humbled by the seer's rebuke, the warrior fell back into position amongst the others.

The seer regarded the man, who had paused to frown at their strange words, spoken in a language and a manner he could not comprehend. So bemused was he that he did not react when the seer pressed two fingers against his forehead. The man slumped at once and fell still, quiescent.

'There is not time enough to calm them all,' said the warrior watching on. 'Our path leads to violence.'

The seer sighed at that, and nodded.

'Yes, as does every path now before us.'

Even here, on this backwater world, the signs were evident. Banners proclaiming fealty to Terra lay mouldering in runnels of polluted filth. Marble statues immortalising the reign of the Master of Mankind had been pulled from their foundations and left to glory in dirt. Even the lawmakers with their mauls and shields could not bring order. Enlightenment had promised that. Instead, old gods had returned. Not just here, but everywhere. Madness had come with them and set men against men. Chaos.

All of this, the seer knew. All of this, he had *seen*.

The shadows of rioters gathered in the distance, hungry and energetic when cast by the dancing flames. Such was the mob's eagerness to spill blood that their shouts threatened to drown out the bells.

The seer looked up at a skyline wracked with the red glow of reflected fire. A body, revealed at first in silhouette, hung suspended between two towers of a broken garrison house. An icon of a clenched fist holding a set of scales was displayed proudly upon the building's facade. Filth besmirched the image, a crudely daubed invective. The hanged man had been beaten. Gouges glistened in place of his eyes, and his uniform was torn and burnt.

The seer averted his gaze. His grip on his staff hardened. The distant shouting grew louder.

'Come, they will return soon.'

'We have nothing to fear from them,' the warrior snorted.

'No, exarch, we do not,' said the seer, 'but these people have seen enough unnecessary bloodshed.'

They moved on.

Smoke occluded the way deeper into the township, but insanity had spread more virulently and destructively than fire ever could. Sigils began to appear,

drawn in blood or rudely carved into stone and wood. The seer recognised an old tongue represented by those marks. They were runes, but not of the eldar race. *Unwords.* Man should not make such utterances; to do so invited damnation.

Though hidden by his helm, the seer's scowl fashioned a certain tone.

'Ruin is here… The Great Enemy, She Who Thirsts, the First Doom and the Last War. Hold fast,' he told his warriors and the cadre stiffened in alertness. 'Ruin is here. It is here.'

The smoke, redolent of cooking flesh, gave way to a triumphal square. A sweeping arch of pitted stone cast a long shadow over the plaza, partly hiding corpses heaped in disarray.

The sigils had been cut into the skin of these victims, and the bodies formed a grim procession that led beneath the arch and to a ghetto of old habs and warehouses. The seer felt his sword hand tremble as he made the first step forwards. Figures lurked at the periphery of the square, cackling quietly, sorrowfully, at the strange warriors amongst them. The warriors' curved helms and sleek armour seemed utterly incongruous amidst such depravity.

None challenged them, those present either too afraid or too insane to care.

In the ghetto the bodies continued, a trail rather than a procession now. They led to an industrial district and stopped at the shuttered door to a munitions warehouse.

'Every bullet, every blade,' said the seer. 'It will not be enough.'

'Then let us act,' said the warrior, the exarch, eyeing the shuttered door dangerously. His blade was drawn. The seer felt the influence of the Bloody-Handed in the other, but kept it at bay in himself. He would need his good sense for what was to come. Let the others bloody themselves. That was their path.

'That is why you are here,' said the seer as they advanced on the warehouse.

The door proved no impediment, yielding easily to a flashing diresword.

Darkness choked the warehouse within, though it posed no challenge to the interlopers. The seer led them, and none would gainsay him.

Inside, away from the streets, the bells and the shouting faded to a dull susurration. A new sound pervaded: rhythmic, hymnal and ritualistic.

Through a dense weave of corridors, the seer and his ten-strong warrior cadre emerged into a wide-open hall lit by crackling braziers. Old rubrics, carved into plates of sheet metal and extolling the virtue of labour, swayed on gantry chains, their messages defiled by more bloody runes.

A horde had gathered, women as well as men. They looked ordinary. A few

wore robes, but the garments were little more than dirty smocks. All had taken up the chant and so lost were they in their dark devotions that none saw the warriors creeping in their midst.

The seer let his retinue overtake him now, slipping left and right to the room's periphery. He could feel the veil thinning and clutched his staff tighter. His teeth clenched. The tang of hot copper prickled his tongue, and he slowed his breathing in order to stay focused.

A demagogue led the sermon, standing above the flock, raised upon a mound of flensed skulls. He was much larger and broader than the others. A transhuman, his dark skin scarified with runic iconography. Robes swathed his muscular form in the fashion of a priest, but he had the bearing of a warrior, though his only visible weapon was a silver dagger. It resonated with power, and in its unique aura the seer recognised something of the other one they had tried to set on the path, and failed.

So they butchered him as well as taking his head, he realised sadly.

Sitting before the demagogue in the crudely sawn cap of another flensed skull were eight shards. Grey stone, akin to long arrowheads, unremarkable – no one without the sight would have given them a second glance.

But they had power, and of a greater magnitude than the knife; they glowed as brightly as a newborn sun in the seer's witch-sight.

The demagogue looked up. The chanting did not stop. It grew more urgent. The flock awakened from its torpor, possibly at the silent insistence of their leader. Crude blades were drawn, catching the meagre light in their dirty metal. Cudgels joined them. Flails unfurled, their chains clanking dully where they touched the ground.

All eyes fell upon the seer, who stood alone to confront the droning mob. He drew his sword at last as they closed upon him, and the seer felt the pull of Khaine on his humours. Blood would be spilled here – the exarch had been right about that at least. The warriors ghosted around the edges of the room, as yet unseen. But as the air began to vibrate and a low hum gnawed at the seer's nerves, and the presence of something close at hand intruded on his thoughts, he spoke into their minds.

+Kill them now,+ he sent urgently.

Light and noise exploded into being like shattering glass.

Those cultists at the edges of the mob barely had time to glimpse their killers before the warriors cut them down with scything rounds from their weapons. Those deeper into the crowd, closer to the heart of the ritual, raised their knives

and clubs in defence… and lasted a few more seconds.

The exarch's sword carved a pretty red arc, cleaving limbs and severing heads as he leapt through the throng. It was efficient, but far from cold.

'Blood runs…' he uttered.

He cut a man across the midriff, separating top and bottom with a flourish.

'Anger rises…'

Another he split from crown to groin.

'Death wakes…'

A third he impaled, spinning as he made the kill, his momentum carrying him forwards and pulling free his blade.

'War calls!'

Except this was not war, it was slaughter. But, the seer reminded himself as his own assailants recoiled from the sudden attack, it was necessary.

The chanting horde diminished before this onslaught until just eight of the supplicants and their demagogue remained. As one, the eight shrank back towards their leader, rancid moths drawn to his corrupt flame, still chanting but now with fear in their eyes.

Not fear of death, the seer realised with disgust, but fear of failing to complete the ritual.

The first of the eight collapsed. Her eyes had burned out, leaving twin hollows defined by rings of blackened skin, her soul cored from within and offered up to a presence clawing at the veil to the beyond. Two more followed – one to the ritual, gratefully slumping to his knees, another shredded by a scything round.

It had only been seconds since the attack began, but the battle dragged as if time had slowed.

Another cultist burned up from within, head arched back, smoke issuing from his lips, the chant half formed as he surrendered his soul to the nameless dark.

He means to unleash something, and quit this place, the seer realised.

'Silence them now!'

The exarch struck down three with swift sword strokes. Some of the armed cultists yet remained, but he ignored them in favour of the supplicants. Though many tried, none could touch him. A fourth fell to his warriors. The last had her throat slit by the demagogue as he chanted with ever greater fervour. His voice became a bellow as it called forth evil from beyond the veil.

The seer cried out again as two of his retinue died, their armour parting like silk before the demagogue's silver blade. Their innards uncoiled from their bodies, contorting into ophidian horrors and wrapping around the limbs of their

comrades.

The exarch still stood, but even he stalled when confronted by this corruption.

Only the seer remained undaunted.

'It is pure evil! Do not baulk before it. Smite it!' he cried.

His witchblade severed the gruesome tendrils of flesh as he advanced on the demagogue, the presence in the warp pressing hard against his psychic aegis now. A trickle of blood ran from his nose, hidden by the mask of his ghosthelm. Every step brought a fresh grimace. His fingers spasmed as they fought to grip his sword. He smelled old meat, the taint of spoiled milk even through his armour's filters.

The demagogue lunged, his silver blade perversely pure in the wan torchlight. A sudden moment of clarity came with it as the seer briefly touched the demagogue's unguarded mind.

Crouched over a hulking form of iron… Black armour, black sand. A splayed hand, a neck long severed, the head absent from the body. Butchers flocked, foul and rabid. Cutting, cutting, sawing at miraculous silver, still vital even with the soul fled and the body inert. A finger came loose, its pointed shape like that of a dagger…

'Enough!' declared the seer, parting the demagogue's wrist from his arm. His fist still gripped the dagger as it struck the ground. The agony that wracked the cult leader as the witchblade met his graven flesh brought the seer no pleasure.

Bloodied and on his knees, the mound of skulls scattered and crushed, the demagogue regarded the seer with scorn.

'All your efforts, all your endeavour… You are desperate, witch.' He smiled, but could not entirely hide his pain as he clutched the stump of his arm. Sweat beaded his bald pate. It was no ordinary wound. A witchblade possessed a psychic resonance. It could hurt the soul and had cut the demagogue deeper than the extent of his flesh. 'Do you know who I am, whom I serve?'

The seer regarded the man, fallen so far from the grace he had been given.

'You are Quor Gallek of the Word, stranded in this place when your vessel failed you,' he said, the *mon-keigh's* crude language jarring on his tongue, 'and it is because of whom you serve that I am here. You sought to make a door, uncaring of what you might leave behind in your passing. That has failed. But you are right…' the seer added, as the ache in his mind began to abate and the air ceased to shimmer.

Quor Gallek flinched, his mouth agape as the witchblade pierced his chest.

'I am, indeed, most desperate,' the seer told him, and fed a surge of psychic

lightning through the blade.

As he pulled free his sword, he wiped the blade clean then gladly sheathed it. The demagogue convulsed as psychic tendrils coursed through his flesh and mind, rendering both husks. He slumped forwards, smoke issuing from empty eye sockets, and stirred no more. The seer paid him no further heed, and instead stooped to retrieve the eight shards, placing them one by one into a casket brought forth from within his robes.

'Even I can feel their power,' said the exarch, briefly regarding the dead demagogue. The killing mood had left him for now.

'They are god-touched,' said the seer, before conceding, 'in a way, at least.'

'And they will do what you claim?'

'Let us hope so.'

They took their dead with them, moving silently and swiftly through the burning township. The fires had worsened, the mobs grown bolder. It would not be long now, the seer knew. This horror was far from isolated, this town not the only one succumbing to madness and fear. Many worlds and their bastions would fall and swear fealty before invasion was even necessary. If Horus' mere presence prompted such mania, then the task the seer had set himself grew ever more important.

The ship lay hidden at the edge of the settlement. Its sleek curves reflected no light and it hovered gently on humming gravitic engines.

'Here is where our paths diverge again, farseer,' said the exarch as the embarkation ramp silently opened.

The seer nodded. 'I am grateful for your aid, exarch.'

'I think Ulthwé will not give you any further help.'

'No,' replied the seer, 'I believe you are right.'

'I wish you well, farseer.'

'And I you,' said the seer, as the exarch mounted the ramp and disappeared inside the ship. The rest of the seer's warriors had already gone aboard, and he was left alone as the engine sound rose to a hum and the ship sped away to meet another, larger vessel, awaiting it in orbit.

The seer's path took him elsewhere and was far from certain. He knew the first steps of it, at least.

He left the landing site on foot, and took a narrow path into the foothills that rose up to the north of the township in a horseshoe shape. Several kilometres out, far from prying eyes, he reached a stony promontory. Without his retinue, the

seer needed to be careful but he had to *see*, to know if anything had changed.

Certain he was unwatched, he reached for the casket.

The wraithbone exterior felt warm to the touch, even through his armour, and as he breached the lid the power confined within struck the seer like a physical blow. He reeled, but held on. The encounter in the warehouse had drained him more than he realised, and he reasserted his psychic wards. Then he touched one of the shards and the pain redoubled…

The portal yawned, stretched obscenely beyond its natural proportions. It had become a gaping maw, ringed with teeth as the bleed of un*matter from the webway reshaped it. Some of the teeth were canine, others grinding molars. From the lurid glow within the portal, a host poured forth…*

They came on diaphanous wings or brass-clad steeds, on claws, or stalk-legs, or hoofs, or slimed-feet. They came in hellish abundance, droning and baying and shrieking and cackling. The air grew thick and cloying as foetid putrefaction warred with noisome incense and the heavy stink of animal sweat and wet copper.

A vanguard of gold raised their spears in defiance of the horror, but it was as rocks trying to hold back the sea. They were swept aside, drowned utterly in the morass.

Others bravely took their place, protectively encircling the Throne and the wretched, emaciated figure upon it.

The daemon sea struck a bulwark then, riding up its invisible flank, unable to crest it, instead rolling ever upwards into the benighted Palace vaults. Hope flared momentarily as the weary defenders looked on at the rising tide that had struck their lord's aegis and been halted.

The lesser host burned as they touched the aegis, reduced to ash and scattered back to whence they had manifested. A golden light radiated from the Throne, growing brighter with every creature it banished. A ragged cheer rang out from the defenders, a hollow echo within the aegis shell that quickly fell silent at the discordant fanfare of eighty-eight brass horns.

They heralded death, and the Last War.

Triumph turned to despair as the Eight trampled through the horde, whips thrashing, axes hewing. The aegis died in the flare of their hot anger, melted away like ice exposed to a furnace with nary a blow struck. It collapsed with a thunderclap that threw down the golden warriors behind it, and spurred the Eight to take leathern wing.

A bold last stand took moments to dismantle, and with one, world-sundering

blow the Exalted of the Eight slew the one upon the Throne and split His seat in twain.

Even those without voice wailed in silent despair as the two halves of the Throne slid apart like offal before the butcher's knife, its strength finally shattered.

The portal blew inwards, a plosive roar that tore a wound in the veil and left it gaping and raw.

The daemon sea swelled in flood, unceasing, unstoppable, consuming the last of the defenders.

As the two great war gods that stood sentry fell, the daemon sea reached the gate.

And the gate fell…

The seer staggered and almost dropped the casket. He held on to it through sheer effort of will and, weary, sealed the wraithbone lid shut. A pale, pearlescent stone embedded in the seer's armour began to softly glow. He touched it with trembling fingers, stifling a gasp of pain.

+Lathsarial…+ he said, the communion like knife shards being rubbed into his skull.

+Diviner,+ a faint voice replied. +I felt your pain, Eldrad.+

+It is nothing compared to experiencing it first-hand, I can assure you.+

+I find your humour misplaced, farseer,+ Lathsarial chided. +I thought you were dead.+

+Only bruised.+

+Did you meet with success?+

The seer nodded, though he knew Lathsarial would be ignorant of the gesture.

+The first part is done. I have the lightning shard, albeit broken.+

+Broken?+ Lathsarial sounded anxious. +How?+

+A blade – not one of his, not the anathames, something else. It is spent, anyway, and this may yet better serve my ends. The skeins of fate are still occluded to me, though. Ripples touching ripples in the pool and causing confusion.+

+What can you see? Were we right? Is it him we must seek?+

+I see a time of ending still. I see the Great Enemy triumphant and all hope extinguished. But, yes, it is him we need. I do it alone, Lathsarial. I can feel your spirit still weakened by the Gorgon's blow.+

+I am dying, Eldrad.+

+I know, we all are now. I am asking as swiftly as I can, but the path is yet

unclear.+

+The aberrations?+

+A future mankind will never see. They jeopardise everything now. I plan to remove them.+

+*All?*+ Lathsarial sounded incredulous.

+Those who have a significant bearing. And their masters. I will hunt them.+

+You know I cannot help you now. And nor will Ulthwé. You are alone in this, Eldrad.+

The seer thought of the casket, of the eight slivers encased within.

+I won't be alone, Lathsarial,+ he said. +I know exactly who to call upon.+

Eldrad Ulthran released the seerstone and Lathsarial faded from his mind. He then reached into his robes and pulled out a rib of wraithbone, beautifully arched and studded with three ruby-red gems. Carved lines in the pearl-white bone formed connective conduits, intersecting with runic markings running across the base.

Muttering an incantation, Eldrad saw the gems illuminate and awaken. He then drew a sigil in the air that lingered like corposant before driving the bone into the earth and stepping back.

It began as a swirling vortex no larger than the extent of his thumb, the arch cradling it until it grew to the size of a clenched fist and then to a skull and then a dome, until finally the dome became an orb, encapsulating a maelstrom of light and darkness.

Eldrad felt the stir of wind as it escaped from the portal, and heard the eldritch song of the webway from beyond its threshold.

Behind him, the township burned. Others burned with it, more than a dozen angry flickering beacons in the valley below. He could not save this world, but he might yet spare another and in so doing spare mankind.

He stepped into the portal and he, the orb and all trace of his presence vanished.

ONE

His origins, in fire

He lay naked in the heart-blood of his world. Surrounded by fire, uncurling from foetal slumber, he should have been dead. Smoke from venting fumaroles shrouded his slowly waking form, drifting across skin that glistened like polished onyx. Neither scar nor burn marred his body as he emerged from the cradle of lava as easily as a man might step from a glacial pool. He was pristine, renewed, untouched despite the heat. The air throbbed with it, redolent of ash and cinder, impossible to breathe. Yet *he* breathed. He lived.

Though uninjured and fully matured, he took wary steps as if relearning how to walk. He regarded hands roughened by physical labour. Much larger than a mortal man's hands, they belonged to a giant, one who had been asleep for a long time, like in a fable of old. And here too, he knew, just like in the old tales, there were dragons…

Rough-hewn steps, little more than heaped slabs, led out of the lava cauldron and down to an umber-hued plateau of igneous rock, where a cloak of drakehide lay unfurled like a blanket. The giant didn't know how it had come to be there, only that it was meant for him. So as he gained the plateau and reached the cloak he took it, sweeping it across his brawny shoulders. His eyes burned within the shadow of the garment's hood, taking stock of the mountain.

A great crag rose up from the plateau, jagged and forbidding, its summit lost in clouds of smoke and sulphur. Veins of obsidian ran through it like the tributaries of an immense river. At the foot of the crag they spread to the plateau, and here the rock resembled a map of ancient ley lines. The giant traced one line with his finger, as if he could read its story by touch alone. A deep roar reverberated through the plateau, felt in his outstretched hand, the steady refrain of shifting

earth and the stirring of ancient beasts.

They too were giants. They too slept, but would perhaps never awaken. He felt their glowering tolerance of him, a threat too weary or uninterested to manifest. This feeling provoked a memory, prompting the giant to reach for the shard of stone jutting from his chest. He had almost forgotten it was there, as though it were an unseen splinter only now beginning to irritate the skin. His fingers had barely caressed its rough edges when a voice said, 'You have been here for several days, Vulkan.'

The giant turned, eyes burning bright, as forbidding as any devil.

'This chamber, vast as it is, has been your tomb and your forge,' said a wizened old man. He was crouched atop a speartip of rock that thrust from the lava sea surrounding the plateau. Smoke and heat haze swam upwards from this spike, obscuring the old man momentarily, but he was there, watching. He was real.

The giant moved his lips.

'I…' The act of speaking felt unfamiliar at first, as if it too were being relearned. 'I am Vulkan.' A fresh waft of cinder followed this revelation, harsh and acerbic.

He had not framed it as a question.

The old man slowly nodded. He grasped a wooden staff to a rangy body fastidiously wrapped in a tribesman's garb. The staff looked gnarled and thin, akin to its bearer, whose feet were unshod and whose skin was almost as dark as the giant's. Soot marked his face, ritualistic in some way that Vulkan knew but had forgotten. Old eyes narrowed. They were almond-shaped, an iridescent blue. Vitality at odds with an elderly frame flashed in them.

'Who are you?' asked Vulkan, suspicious.

'I am Deathfire,' said the old man, and gave a shallow but respectful bow, 'my Lord of Drakes.'

'Deathfire is this mountain,' said Vulkan, gesturing to the vast chamber around them.

The old man nodded again. 'Yes, I am the mountain and it is me.'

'Is that how you are alive?'

'Let us say yes, for it is a far simpler explanation than the alternative.'

'How do you know my name?'

'I know it in the same way that I know you have been down here for several days, Vulkan. This is the deepest forge. You call it the Maw, a place known only to you and the mountain that keeps it. Others' fathers may come to know it in time, but for now just you.' He smiled indulgently.

Vulkan frowned. ‘I do not understand.’ His fingers strayed to the shard in his chest.

The old man unfurled a little from his perch to gesture at the shard with his staff. ‘A shard of a shard of a shard,’ he said cryptically. ‘That wounded you. It killed you. For a while.’

‘Am I dead then?’ asked Vulkan, his hand falling away from the shard as if to touch it might bring death anew. ‘Is this the underworld?’

‘It is certainly hellish enough to be one, eh?’ The old man smiled. ‘No. Far from it. You are reborn, Vulkan.’ He pointed to the cradle from where Vulkan had emerged. It crested a pillar of rock, one protruding from the lava sea and linked to the plateau by a stairway. The lava within the cradle bubbled and spat, congealing in thick syrupy folds, a crust of dark rock cracking and splitting on its surface before being consumed. ‘I have watched you enter the fire and emerge over and again. You would rise, reach the plateau and then go back. Never before did you reach the crag or take up your old mantle. Only the hammer.’

Vulkan regarded the drakehide cloak. He pulled it tighter about him.

‘What hammer?’ he asked, but his eyes had already strayed from the old man to a thin tract of stone that led from the plateau to an archway and an antechamber, where a metal shape shone with captured firelight.

An anvil.

Upon it lay a fuller, a blacksmith’s tool.

A talisman hung around Vulkan’s neck on a chain. The metal felt cool, despite the lava it had undoubtedly been exposed to.

‘Did I…?’

‘Forge it? Yes, you did. You laboured for several hours on it, though you shared nothing of what went into its creation.’

Vulkan turned back to regard the old man.

‘I remember nothing of this.’

‘But you do remember everything else, don’t you, Vulkan?’

Vulkan frowned, looking down to his leathern hands, blacksmith’s hands, as if the sight of them might fill the space in his memory regarding the talisman. It appeared to be ornate, fashioned from a gilded metal that had withstood the mountain’s heart-blood. A drake’s fanged visage formed a boss at its middle, and around it were arranged seven hammers.

‘They are called black-smiters,’ he murmured. ‘Nocturnean makers and metal-shapers, since the eldest days, since before my father found me…’

‘Your father?’ prompted the old man.

‘My *creator*,’ Vulkan said. ‘I am His warrior. A general in His war. I remember… Isstvan, and then…’ His face darkened at the memory. ‘I felt light and pain,’ he muttered, gently tracing the talisman’s artistry with his fingers. ‘Macragge… I was on Macragge. The spear, the fulgurite…’ He let go of the talisman to reach for the shard impaling his chest, stopping just short of touching it. Vulkan’s gaze met that of the old man’s, whose eyes had not yet left the primarch.

‘I *am* Vulkan. I died, I *really* died, and have come back.’

He remembered part of an old Nocturnean proverb about the dead. That they could never come back. Not the same. It boded ill.

The old man gestured beyond his perch of stone, to the other side of the vast lava sea.

Following his gesture, Vulkan’s gaze alighted on a curve of night-black rock jutting like a fin from the magma, almost fully submerged. He had not seen it before, but knew it had always been here. Strange runes had been etched into its surface and they glowed faintly.

‘You must take the shadowed road, Lord of Drakes. It leads to a fell place, but that is your path.’ He appeared sad, but resigned to this truth.

‘My path?’

‘Your fate.’

Vulkan turned sharply. ‘What do you know of it?’ he asked, suddenly angry. ‘Likely you are a figment of my fevered mind. I have experienced this before.’

‘I assure you, I am real, and what I say is the truth. You know this, Vulkan.’ He jabbed a finger at the stone. ‘That is a gate, an eldritch gate you might say. A border between realms.’

‘And I must cross this gate?’

‘Do you feel your strength returning yet, Vulkan?’

Vulkan looked down as he thought on that, then clenched his fist.

‘Yes.’

‘Good. Below this cavern is a vault. You will need to breach it in order to cross the gate.’

Vulkan looked down and saw the beginnings of another path, swallowed by lava but leading down from the plateau towards where the gate must be.

‘How?’

The old man gestured back to the anvil. ‘You forged more than just a talisman, Lord of Drakes. Look closer.’

A great hammer lay upon the anvil, a two-handed weapon with the head of a snarling drake at one end and a jutting spike at the other.

Urdrakule, its name echoed in Vulkan's mind, the *Burning Hand*.

'You must descend into the fire, to the very nadir of this basin… and shatter it.'

'And reveal what lies beneath?'

'Yes, but not yet. Your sons are coming.'

Vulkan nodded. 'My sons…' He placed his left hand against the rough wall of the magma chamber. 'Nocturne is slipping back into slumber.' He let out a long, calming breath. 'Deathfire,' he said, turning, 'why am I here?'

But the old man was gone, and Deathfire was silent again.

A storm raged beyond the shelter of the mountain. Vulkan staggered from a fissure in the rock, right into the teeth of it. Pyroclastic cloud swept low and aggressively across the desert, bringing with it ash and stinging cinder.

Vulkan barely felt it, but still huddled within his cloak against the hot wind.

His strength had yet to return fully and, exposed to the fury of the storm, he realised just how weak he had become. He fell as an arc of lightning speared from the roiling red heavens above. It earthed seven times, each blow more violent than the last, until a massive crater of black glass stood in its wake. Vulkan stood at its still steaming edge and crossed the smoke pall heedlessly, occasionally stumbling, deafened by the roar of eruption and the crack of sundered earth.

The shadow of a city loomed ahead, large and forbidding. An immense gate was visible despite the distance and the dark, but a crackling void shield dome was the city's true defence. Lightning struck once more, unleashing a bright viridian flash that flowed across the shield, its curvature revealed in light. An impression of towers and walls was quickly lost to shadow as the energy died away. Ozone stung the air a few seconds later. The city fell back into darkness.

Thunder bellowed, a displeased god at odds with nature as a great tectonic upheaval took place. Vulkan felt it through his bare feet, a trembling that grew into a ferocious quake. A great fissure opened up in the ground, a maw of spewing sulphur vapour and steam, accompanied by a violent phreatic roar.

It almost swallowed Vulkan back into the earth, and he had no desire to begin the long climb again. He staggered from its path, the air thick with ash that clung to his body and amassed around his feet so densely that he sank down into its depths, head bowed, humbled by Nocturne's fury.

And there he stayed until the mountain stilled and the earth quieted, and the

Time of Trial ended.

A distant thrum of engines woke him.

Vulkan opened his eyes, disturbing a hardened layer of ash. It broke and flaked away, and the desert appeared before him. Swathes of smoke and thicker agglomerations of ash scudded across the Arridian Plain, driven by winds coming off the Acerbian Sea to the north, obscuring the horizon. Three hovering silhouettes, their outlines trembling in the heat, emerged from a long grey pall.

Billowing dust clouds spewed out in the wake of their air intakes. The sight reminded Vulkan of a seaborne ship spearing through the ocean, or a gnorl-whale on the hunt. A leonid, native to the plain, fled at the silhouettes' approach. The creature retreated to a rocky promontory, content to watch, unaccustomed to a greater predator in its hunting ground.

Vulkan's eyes narrowed.

Sky Hunters, he realised. On Scimitar-pattern jetbikes.

He was remembering, the craft, the creatures… Nocturne.

They were seeking something, urgently. Why else take jetbikes? Not him. It could not be him. His sons believed him dead. He tried to lift his hand, to hail or beckon, but it resisted as if an anvil held it down.

I am too weak.

It had to be the climb. It had taken him hours to summit the crag, and then hours more to find the fissure in the mountain's flank.

He could see them clearly now. His head felt heavy, his bones ached. Huddled in ash, wrapped in a hooded mantle of drakehide, Vulkan stayed still. They were coming.

At last, the lead jetbike slewed to a halt, several metres away. The rider quickly dismounted. He ran across the plain, heavy boots forging deep impressions in the ash, hulking scale-green armour worn as effortlessly as a lightweight huntsman's cloak. The jetbike hovered, near-silent, gently bobbing up and down. Vulkan heard the low throb of gravitic impellers and the soft rasp of displaced earth.

The warrior slowed, the urgency of his footfalls decreasing, crunching shards of rapidly formed obsidian glass beneath him.

Vulkan bowed his head, no longer able to hold it up. He grasped the shard in his chest, the *fulgurite*. It burned still, but the pain kept him awake. He could feel his body responding, his miraculous physiology reknitting wounds, purging atrophy, restoring vigour. His grip tightened.

'Brother…' Vulkan heard the warrior utter, not to him but to one of his

companions. They were only a few strides distant now.

The other two had closed, dismounting swiftly to catch up to the leader.

‘Numeon?’ asked the warrior of Vulkan.

They do not know me. They think I am dead. They think I am…

The name brought an unwelcome pang of grief as Vulkan recognised it.

A last few footfalls brought the warrior to within touching distance. Vulkan heard his approach, the soft growl of power armour, the low metal grind of a gauntlet’s whirring fingers reaching for him. The smell of oil and ash and heat.

‘Is he alive?’ asked another, farther away but also closing.

The first warrior paused, realising his error.

He knows something is wrong, but he does not know what.

Then he fell to his knees as Vulkan looked up.

The warrior gasped, ‘In the name of…’

Vulkan… He sees me now.

The others stopped, one then another, until all three regarded him. Though they wore their helms – snarling, draconic, belligerent – Vulkan knew their mouths would be agape, their eyes wide behind red flaring slits.

He stood, shrugging off the ash cloak and letting it cascade from his mantle. He felt unsteady, but gripped the fulgurite in a firm hand as he regarded them. His joy almost went beyond words, but he found two in that moment.

‘My sons…’

Themis. Vulkan knew the City of Warrior Kings well, as he knew all of the Sanctuary Cities. He had helped raise them, fought for them, buried their warriors, seen them sundered and then thrive again.

Barek Zytos had come from a Themian tribe. His broad neck and stern disposition made his provenance obvious. The drakes shaved into the crimson hair on either side of his head suggested he had been a hunter, though he had the gait and demeanour of a brawler. Vulkan knew this too as the warrior regarded him with quiet awe.

The four of them, the primarch and three of his sons, stood in sight of the city. The warriors had not strayed from his side since being reunited on the Arridian Plain, at the foot of Mount Deathfire.

They had not spoken either, not until Zytos said, ‘An Apothecary is on his way from the Draconius Gate. He will be close by now.’

‘Tell him to turn back. That you were mistaken, Barek,’ Vulkan replied. ‘None other than you three must know I am here.’ He eyed them in turn.

A hot wind blowing down off the slopes disturbed the edges of the primarch's drakehide cloak, and filled a brief silence.

'Why not, my lord?' asked Igen Gargo. A black-smiter, obvious from the deepening of his brow, and the burn scars across his cheeks and nose. Heavy shoulders encroached upon a thick neck. Shorter than Zytos, he had shaved white hair and a thin beard that ran down his chin. It reminded Vulkan of white ash. All three, perhaps out of respect, or perhaps because they would only believe what the naked eye told them, had removed their helms.

Gargo's helm was particularly ornate, and hung on a strap of sauroch leather from his weapons belt. Both his arms were bionic. The right looked crude by comparison, though evidently functional. The left carried T'kell's mark, a masterpiece of artifice.

'Your resurrection… It is… miraculous. The Legion must be told.'

Zytos quietly ordered the Apothecary to return to the Draconius Gate, citing a false alarm and apologising for his rashness.

Gargo frowned, looking from primarch to battle-brother.

'I do not understand.'

'Nor do I,' said Zytos, 'but if it is Vulkan's will…'

Vulkan nodded, and turned to the last of the three.

'Atok?'

Abidemi bowed, barely resisting the urge to kneel.

'Lord primarch,' he said, his deep voice almost a growl.

'Do you believe as your brothers do? Am I selfish to ask this of you?'

Atok Abidemi raised his eyes, but not his chin. The thin crest of hair dividing his scalp had been dyed a darker green than his scalloped armour.

'I believe Artellus Numeon died, so you could live. I now carry his sword. I do not know how he did this. Or why it happened. I only know what I can see. I see my primarch. I hear his voice. Do you wish to know what I believe, father?' He raised himself up again, emotion making him tremble. 'I believe… Vulkan lives.'

Vulkan embraced him, father to son. He embraced them all, and felt the pain of the last few years lessen.

'Heed me,' he said. 'Say nothing of this. Tell no one. The Legion must think I am dead.'

'But, lord primarch–' Gargo began.

Zytos gave him a fierce glance, but Vulkan raised his hand for calm.

'I need your trust, my sons.'

‘And you have it,’ said Zytos, ‘but I do not know what to make of this.’

Vulkan gave a sombre smile. ‘I expect this is not the reunion you envisaged when I and not Numeon came out of the desert. But it is *my* will. Horus and his kind believe me dead. Let them. My father has generals aplenty. That was never my true purpose, but I had to die first to understand that.’ Vulkan smiled again, wry and a little indulgent. ‘Ever curious is my father’s humour. Even standing before you, reborn, I still do not fully grasp His intent. There are… pieces missing. A plan. But I know I will never return to this war at the head of a Legion. It saddens me, for nothing would give me greater joy, but the sons of Nocturne are not unfamiliar with sacrifice. This is mine. I now ask it of you also.’

Zytos ran a hand across his shorn scalp, squinting against the sun. ‘Should this honour not be Rhy’tan’s, or at least one of the Igniax? Had T’kell not already left Prometheus…’

Vulkan rested a hand on his shoulder.

‘It is you who ventured out into the desert, Barek. You and Igen and Atok. You who protected me as I slept, across the Ruinstorm. You who brought me back.’

‘Numeon did that,’ Zytos replied, failing to hide a tremor of emotion in his voice.

‘Numeon *chose* you. As I chose him. He did not undertake his task alone.’ He released Zytos to speak to his sons as one. ‘In the earliest days of Nocturne, before my father came and gave us the gift of illumination, the gift of Imperium, tribal chieftains had a name for their closest warriors and seneschals. They called them *draaksward*, sword dragons. I name you three the Draaksward. I am in need of sword dragons, of your brotherhood.’

The sea wind blew a mournful chorus across the desert. It seemed to linger overlong, before Zytos stepped up to the primarch. For a supposed savage of Themis, he was both noble and proud.

‘What would you have us do?’

‘Return here, after three suns have passed. Return to the mountain. Bring a ship. Small. Fast. Our leaving must remain unnoticed.’

‘And to where are we bound, my lord?’ asked Zytos.

‘The shadowed road,’ said Vulkan, echoing the old man’s words. ‘An old, forgotten path.’

Gargo and Abidemi exchanged a glance. Zytos had doubts too, but his love and obedience for his primarch overrode them.

‘We would follow you unto death if necessary, my lord. I will not lie, though. I

have questions. Many of them, and I still grieve for Numeon, even as I grieved for you. I cannot claim to fathom what has brought this day to pass. I am ignorant of the deeper secrets of the universe, and confess I remain bewildered. But you need not ask for what is freely given.' He reached behind him and pulled forth an ornate thunder hammer strapped to his armour's power generator. 'Upon this hammer, I swear it.'

Abidemi reached for his scabbard and drew the blade within. 'I will take the path with you, my lord,' he declared hoarsely.

'And you, Igen?' Vulkan asked the last of his sons.

Gargo turned, and Zytos looked about to reprimand him when he reached for a spear lashed to the side of one of the jetbikes. He returned and thrust its heel deep into the earth, so the speartip stood proud and shone in the sun.

'I fear no shadows, not with the primarch by my side.'

Vulkan nodded, stern, fiercely approving.

'Three suns,' he said, letting his gaze fall on each and every one of his legionaries.

Three sons… It could not merely be coincidence.

Then he turned and slowly trudged back to the mountain.

The growl of engines came to him a few minutes later as his sons departed, back to the Draconius Gate and the lies they would have to tell their comrades about why they had gone into the desert and what they had found.

After a short climb up the crags, Vulkan found the fissure again. He descended deep into smoke and flame, and returned to the chamber. His hammer awaited him, standing upright, perfectly balanced, its head touching the earth, its haft beckoning.

Nocturneans believed that when a weapon was forged, it not only gained form but also animus. It became, for want of a better term, conscious. Such stories were told by the elder black-smiters, but as he beheld the hammer and gripped the haft, Vulkan could believe it too. He found his strength and reached for the fulgurite lodged in his chest, wrenching it free as if he were drawing out a thorn. The primarch let out a breath and felt the agony of the excision fade with it. One hand still on the hammer's haft, he took a knee and reverently laid the stone shard down. It held the Emperor's grace, and so it was the Emperor in Vulkan's eyes.

Then he stood and regarded the sea of lava, and the jutting edge of the eldritch gate just visible above its bubbling skin.

Gripping the hammer in both hands, Vulkan swept it around in a half-arc. There

was work to be done.

TWO

Ambition, made in iron

Ezekarr dug another fistful of dirt, and dragged his body across the scorched earth of the outpost. Razor wire tore the rubber seal around his left arm, and ripped small iron-grey grooves into the sea-green of his war-plate. He was tangled in the wire, its barbs digging in, finding purchase, relentlessly cutting, slowly squeezing the life from him, like a python constricting about its victim.

He heard them coming, battering through stacked munitions crates, blades sawing and growling as they took the makeshift palisades apart.

Still Ezekarr crawled, and felt the dirt intruding through a split in his gauntlet. He'd lost a finger somewhere. Perhaps to a bolt-round. He couldn't remember. He'd lost his legs too, or at least everything that mattered below the knee. His ragged, bloody stumps, lathered in machine oil and mud, were little use in terms of forward momentum. The edges of twisted metal, where his armour had been roughly severed, snared on the wire, forcing a grimace as the barbs found flesh.

Ezekarr would have laughed at their temerity had he not been dying. Perhaps he should laugh anyway, meet his killers with baffling good humour. They would hate that, those cold bastards. They couldn't understand *that*. The war, their losses, had put it beyond them.

An explosion sounded, muffled by the growing fug of smoke, distance or his failing auditory senses, Ezekarr could not say for certain. He knew it meant they were in, beyond the cordon he and his brothers had fought so hard to hold. The attack had come fast and during night hours. The lack of light had proven no impediment to the efficacy of the warriors on either side, but it had masked the approach of those in black power armour to an extent, and turned obvious interlopers into silhouettes that matched the form of allies. It had provided a

second's grace for the attackers, and a legionary could accomplish much in even so short a span of time.

He and his brothers had been slow. Not by any ordinary standards, of course, but the ones that mattered – the standards that would be met and superseded by their enemies.

It had begun in fire. A sprawling line of flame had sprung up in the north like a ragged, flickering grin where the commercia used to be. Ezekarr and his brothers had flattened it during daylight hours with launched ordnance from a battery of Medusas before the Vindicator tanks had moved in with dozer-blades to shovel away the rubble and the bodies. It had taken several hours. Labour gangs had been formed from the local populace. After landfall, and less than an hour of conflict, in which the world's defence forces had been critically diminished in both size and morale, the remaining sixteen native garrisons had reneged their oaths to Terra and sworn to the Warmaster, though he was far away in another part of the segmentum.

Prefabricated watchtowers had been raised up like a row of spears. Communal halls and agri habs had been emptied, fortified and turned into munitions stores. What could not be housed inside was piled and stacked and lashed together in the municipal square, where a statue of the lord-governor lay headless like its namesake and reduced to rubble beneath a Vindicator's tracks.

This they had done swiftly, efficiently, brutally, but without needless bloodshed, until a supply dump the size of several city blocks had been established. This had been designated 'secundus'. Ezekarr also knew of 'tertius' and 'primus'. The initial stages of the invasion had proceeded according to plan. In fact, they had exceeded expectations.

That had been then. Now he crawled, the irony not lost on him that these were his brothers' defences that had bled him almost to the bone. Through a rapidly dispersed smoke cloud, he saw a sea-green gauntlet and thought reinforcements had come. He reached for it, though the act of doing so provoked agony as the wire pulled taut.

The gauntlet yielded instantly to his grasp and he realised it was no longer attached to its owner. A bloody stump of wrist poked out the end, and Ezekarr dropped it in disgust. He drew a rattling breath, still trying to worm out from under the razor wire, and felt his throat burn. Then it tightened. Choke gas. His helm rebreather must be broken. He tried to move and felt a cracked retinal lens fall out in pieces. The world grew brighter, more painful, in one eye.

Yes, definitely broken.

He was about to reach for the gorget seal to disengage his helm when a shadow fell across him. The scent of oil and soot stung his nose. He looked up to see an armoured foot. It had splayed metal toes and gave off a low machine grind, a bionic. It slammed down on his outstretched hand, breaking two of his remaining fingers.

Ezekarr resisted the urge to cry out. He did manage to turn, craning his neck so he could see his attacker.

A burning red bionic eye, set in a black war-helm, glared down. A heavy hammer crackled in the warrior's clenched fist. He almost trembled with repressed anger. The fist too was a bionic.

'You should watch that anger,' said Ezekarr, and went for his holstered pistol with his other hand. 'It will get you–'

Frenix lifted his hammer. A long strand of congealed blood and matter stretched from the ruddy head to the ruin of the legionary's helm. His blow had split ceramite and crushed most of the skull beneath. Red bone chips stuck up out of a growing pool of blood. Frenix, of Clan Saargor and the Iron Tenth, intensified the thunder hammer's energy field to burn off the stuck-on gore.

The dead legionary blinked. A gurgle of breath escaped his throat, foaming on his bottom lip.

Frenix scowled. His bionic foot twitched reflexively and broke the other bones in the legionary's hand.

He hefted his hammer, annoyed that he had only just cleansed it.

'Death to all traitors,' he said, part machine rasp, all human hostility. 'In the name of Shadrak Meduson.'

The hammer fell again.

They knew his name. That was good. It made him a target, but notoriety had its advantages. So did immortality, for hadn't his enemies already killed him more than once? At Arissak. At Dwell. Yet, here he was. Alive. Fighting. The most pernicious of thorns. It hadn't been easy, convincing the clan-fathers and gathering the other captains, but successive victories could be used as currency when trying to convince recalcitrant allies.

As he stood surveying the battlefield they had made of Hamart III, Shadrak Meduson knew he would need more for what was ahead. This was but the beginning. He had a plan.

It was burning, the outpost. Its defences had been overrun. Watchtowers were aflame, barricades toppled. Warriors in the soot-black of the Iron Tenth ran

amok. Ravens wearing even darker black ranged around the periphery. He saw few of them, such was their creed of war – silence, stealth, sabotage. Fewer still were the Drakes, bellicose and aggressive in their scale-green armour. They fought stolidly, without fear. Like the others, they had little left to lose. But the prize here was worth the fight.

The supplies they had taken would be useful. They would also need to be cached when this was over, split up, divided and then hidden in smaller ammo dumps. Tanks, walkers, heavy munitions, explosives, even medical supplies, the Sons of Horus had provided a wide array of materiel.

It would prove useful. Had he been of a mind, Meduson might have felt gratitude to the Sons of Horus for that. Hatred overrode it, and the gnawing ache of an unsatisfied desire for revenge. His fist clenched unconsciously. It had been doing that a lot lately. An augmetic. Of decent quality, and grafted well on account of Gorgonson's surgeries. It still itched, but then so did a lot of things.

Sixteen separate cells had come together for this raid. After what had happened at Oqueth that hadn't been easy, but it had demonstrated what they could do when allied together and were utilising the strengths of three Legions, not just one. Two days' preparation had necessitated some risk. Two days to communicate a plan and coordinate the strike. Iron Hands were naturally well organised, but the few Salamanders and Raven Guard amongst the Iron Tenth's ranks had adapted well to the methodology of the majority Legion, as well as contributing strategies of their own. It was as it had been said at Aeteria. A hybridisation of tactics had garnered success.

Risk bred greater risk, of course. A time fast approached when that growing degree of risk would become unpalatable to some. Meduson knew this. It was part of the reason he went for the supply dump. Confidence was a commodity too. He would need to spend all they had in supply for what came after Hamart.

Some of the clan-fathers, those who had assumed de facto positions vacated by the slain Vircule, Loreson, Kolver and Mach, had proven resistant, but Meduson felt sure logic would override the desire for self-preservation. If the Iron Tenth were to move forward, it would have to. From the ashes of Isstvan, they would have to.

The vox-bead crackled in Meduson's ear, and he attended to it at once. He barely heard it over his own thoughts and the armoured battle tank waiting nearby for his order.

'Are we finished here?' he asked the voice on the other end of the link.

'*A few remain, but they are beaten. Broken.*'

‘Every one of them, Frenix. No survivors. No prisoners. Round them up, kill them. Don’t contact me again until it is done.’ Meduson severed the link, and exhaled a long calming breath.

‘I recognise that volatility,’ said Aug, standing at the Warleader’s side.

‘Do you, Frater? I see it in every loyal brother on this field.’ He turned to one of his council. ‘What say you, Nuros?’

The Salamander had his helm in the crook of his arm. Strands of his vibrant red hair, though partly slicked to his scalp with sweat, whipped about in the wind like flickering tongues of flame. He still had the volkite caliver he had stolen from the XVI Legion warship, though Nuros had since improved upon its design and wrought an aesthetic more in keeping with his culture. A dragonhead baring its fangs snarled at the weapon’s mouth. Nuros mirrored it. He grinned, his black leathery skin pulling at the corners of his mouth, exposing alabaster-white teeth.

‘Aye, it heats the blood I’d say.’ His gaze strayed northwards, fixed upon a steadily rising conflagration. ‘Let the curs burn. Every damned one of them.’

Meduson addressed the others. ‘Lumak, Mechosa?’

The former, the captain of Clan Avernii, nodded. ‘Oh, I’m with the Drake. Fire is the only way to be sure.’

Mechosa gave a rare, bellicose chuckle, confirming his position. ‘No need to ask Dalcoth, I think,’ said the captain of Clan Sorrgol, his gaze moving to the silent figure of the Raven Guard. The son of Corax stood slightly apart from the rest, as was his way, a wraith in shadow-black, deadly and invisible when he wanted to be. He tightened a gauntleted fist around his sheathed axe, aching to unleash it.

‘It’s a good victory,’ said Aug, placing his hand on Meduson’s armoured shoulder. Though the ministrations of the Mechanicum on Lliax had left him more flesh-spare than ever, Aug still retained his old sense of camaraderie. He rarely took off his helm any more, and beneath his armour he was more metal than man. It didn’t matter. The flesh might be weak, but brotherhood was not.

Meduson nodded. ‘The supplies will prove useful, though I confess I think I like more the idea of denying them to the enemy than taking them ourselves.’

‘Surely you don’t favour destroying the cache out of hand?’ said Aug.

Mechosa and Lumak shared a furtive smile, though Meduson saw it. He smiled too, inwardly, but was reminded how far estranged his Hand Elect was from his inner circle. He hadn’t intended it that way, but Aug’s debilitating injuries after Oqueth had forced changes that had knitted well in his absence. Meduson was reluctant to do anything that would jeopardise that, especially as they had finally

begun to get somewhere.

Perhaps we can graft heads, after all, he mused.

'I was tempted,' Meduson admitted, 'but pragmatism won out in the end. Besides,' he added, 'we need them.'

'I am relieved to hear it,' said Aug.

Meduson felt the Iron Father's gaze upon him. Of the six of them, Aug was the only one still wearing his war-helm.

'Something amiss, Frater?' he asked.

'You have blood on your face,' Aug replied.

'Don't worry,' Meduson replied, replacing his helm, 'none of it is mine.'

Lumak laughed, shouldering a depowered Medusan zweihander.

'You should name that blade,' said Nuros.

'It has a name,' Lumak replied. '*Sword*.'

'No. A better name. A war-name.'

'How did you even know I was hefting it?'

Nuros stood a few paces ahead of the two Iron Hands captains. His grin broadened, a dragon's smile.

'I heard it scrape your guard. The metal is thrice by thrice folded. It's an alloy, hand-worked, a smith's work. Well forged. All of that together with the inscription carved into the blade provokes a particular resonance when struck just so.'

'Are you showing off, Nuros?' asked Meduson.

The Salamander held up his thumb and forefinger, pinched a half-inch apart. 'Only a little. What about *Cleave?*' he asked Lumak.

The Avernii paused a beat to consider it. 'Rather blunt, isn't it?'

'Precisely the opposite.'

A vox crackle in Meduson's ear stalled any further talk, his raised hand commanding silence.

'Understood,' he said after a few seconds, and cut the link.

'Frenix?' asked Mechosa, all business.

Meduson nodded. 'It's done.' He opened the vox-link again, but not to raise Frenix.

'Ironwrought Bereg,' he said, 'the traitors are dead. Supplies are secure. Level the rest of it.'

From the south, a kilometre behind their position, came the grind of tracks and throaty growl of labouring engines. After a few minutes, the engine growl changed to a pneumatic throb. A pregnant pause of another three seconds passed

before the air shrieked with the violent discharge of ordnance.

A rain of siege mortar shells, little more than vapour-wreathed masses scoring through the night, arced overhead. The six legionaries watched the shells' parabolas take them down into the heart of the supply dump, now divested of its riches and little more than half-standing prefab structures and failed improvised defence lines. The siege shells broke upon the camp in successive destructive impacts. After three chained barrages, not much more remained of the outpost than a crater. Smoke reached skywards, limned orange by the fires cropping up sporadically throughout the camp's devastated footprint. It had been utterly flattened.

Shadrak Meduson commended Bereg on the execution of his task before hailing the battlegroup.

'All right then,' he said, deliberately informal. 'Well fought, brothers. Now we take the last one. Raise the storm.'

The Land Raider Proteus, engines idling, began to stir.

The others donned their war-helms as the entry ramp slammed down.

'Let's not keep our traitorous cousins waiting,' said Meduson, grimly. 'They have had enough borrowed time already. Nothing lives.'

'Nothing lives,' echoed the others, and mounted up.

Nature makes a body recoil when struck. The instinct is one of preservation, a desire to minimise further harm. Though transhuman, and ostensibly beyond such reactions, the Sons of Horus behaved in this manner after the first two camps had been put to the torch by Meduson and his warriors.

The Warleader had been ruthless. Moreover, his name was bellowed from every vox-horn and uttered as every battle cry. They chanted it, the iron sons of Medusa. So did the Drakes. Only the Raven Guard held their tongues, but then silence was their way and had been perfectly alloyed to a more brutish methodology.

The defenders of the final camp retreated, a splayed hand retracting into a bunched fist. A predictable reaction. Some of Hamart's oath-sworn defectors turned again to serve their own ends, fleeing into the night. Meduson ignored them. They would be hunted down eventually, executed for swearing allegiance to traitors, but for now he reserved all of his ire for the Sons of Horus.

The first ranks of the defenders went down like chaff. Native soldiery, human, armed with well-maintained lascarbines and heavy autocannons. Decently trained. Defectors. They only lasted minutes against Meduson's determined

assault. He had crafted a bludgeon to smash his way in from the northern side of the camp, a solid phalanx.

Larger than the others, the final camp had a greater concentration of men and materiel. Heavy storage crates rose in metal ziggurats, forming entire sloped ranges of cased bullets and arms. Ranks of heavier munitions, mainly missiles and bombs, walled off entire sections of the camp. Stacks of promethium drums sat opposite, partly obscured by flame-retardant tarps. Freight-haulers stood in loose formation, paused in the act of disgorging further supplies. Unmanned tanks and fighters waited idly in open-fronted hangars. Tents groaned with ration packs and medical supplies. Bunkers, turrets and towers warded the main approaches. A large municipal structure dominated the camp's core, appended by several permanent gun emplacements.

Jebez Aug led them in, a cohort of Medusan Immortals surrounding him with breacher shields and an implacable refusal to die.

'Heavy turret on the left,' he said, with all the emotion of a man pointing out the state of the weather.

A storm hit the turret, an up-armoured, blocky dome of riveted metal, its autocannon frantically chugging out shells. It disappeared as a volley of melta beams struck it. Only smoking slag remained, and the Iron Hands pushed on.

The defenders had had the presence of mind to erect barricades, but they were hastily constructed. Bodies in the besmirched uniforms of Hamart's local soldiery hung across parted razor wire, shredded sandbag emplacements and broken steel redoubts. Hulking Iron Hands in black armour clambered through the breach, desperate shots pranging off battered but unbreakable war-plate. Successive layers of defences were met and then overcome, each one more fragile than the last.

'Mechosa,' said Meduson via the vox. He adopted a *refused* position behind Aug's mailed fist of Immortals. The core of Meduson's troops were Iron Tenth, all veterans, though a handful of Salamanders in Cataphractii-pattern war-plate bulked them out and added sheer force if it became needed.

It hadn't been. Not yet.

'*Right flank secure,*' the captain of Clan Sorrgol replied a moment later. '*No casualties. Pressing on.*'

The tactical display in Meduson's helm confirmed it. Mechosa had made significant gains.

Meduson turned to the warrior at his shoulder, who bore the caduceus of the Apothecarion on his armour.

‘Seems you’ll have precious little to occupy you when this is done, brother.’

Gorgonson gave a grunt of acknowledgement. ‘It’s not done yet, Shadrak.’

Meduson’s squads waded through a hail of las-beams, Aug’s Immortals bearing the brunt of it. ‘Feels no worse than a heavy rain, eh, Goran?’

The defenders had set up a firing line, three ranks thick. Bright red beams stabbed out of the dark.

‘Not been out in many storms, have you, Shadrak,’ the Apothecary replied.

Meduson laughed, a thunderous bellow that drowned out the whine of enemy fire. ‘I have *walked* the storm, as have you brother. On Terra.’

Explosions stitched across the firing line, and tore it apart.

‘Then it is your memory that’s at fault, I see,’ said Gorgonson, watching the heavily armoured Salamander responsible for the recent destruction auto-load his shoulder mounted Cyclone launchers and move on. ‘Alas, I have no cure for that.’

Another hearty laugh echoed across the battlefield. ‘Fair enough,’ Meduson conceded, ‘but let’s get through these wretches and to the real enemy. Only cowards hide behind the weak.’

He raised Lumak, who had met heavier resistance on the left but was maintaining a steady advance. Numerous fires, reaching high above a ring of gutted watchtowers to the south, confirmed Nuros had made significant inroads. The bulk of the infantry had been drawn here. It had been the first point of ingress, and the loudest. It had drawn a crowd. Now that crowd burned.

‘Nuros,’ voxed Meduson, ‘have you sated your anger yet?’

‘*Only warming up, Warleader.*’

Meduson grinned behind his faceplate. ‘For a Nocturnean, you have a passable wit,’ he said.

‘*And this coming from an Iron Hand,*’ Nuros replied, the roar of flamers in the background. ‘*I don’t know if I should take that as an insult?*’

‘Tell me you’re making progress and you can take it any way you’d like.’

‘*We’re mopping up here. Nothing left but charred corpses. Even their bones are ash.*’

‘Any sign of the Sixteenth?’

‘*Not even their treacherous stench, Warleader.*’

Meduson frowned. The northern defences had collapsed. Mechosa and Lumak drove up the east and west, and Nuros had all but purged the south and put it to flame.

‘They are gathering their forces, whatever remains,’ he said to the Salamander.

‘Surrounded, they can’t win this, but they will try to hurt us.’

‘*I agree, Warleader. A cautious approach is called for.*’

‘Leave no stone unburned, Nuros. Scorch the earth. Then move to converge with Captain Mechosa.’

The Salamander signalled an affirmative and then went about his orders.

Resistance from the north had ebbed to a trickle. Enemy fighters were being rounded up and executed. Even the ones who surrendered got no quarter from the vengeful Iron Tenth.

A pair of large bunkers exploded in quick succession. Makeshift ablative armour bent and flew outwards. Fire and smoke spilled through their viewslits. Krak charges laid by Aug’s Immortals had blown them wide open. Frag grenades tossed into the breach made sure they were clear.

‘*The core is open, Warleader,*’ said Aug over the vox, his back to Meduson as he consolidated the position just won by the Immortals.

Enemy fire still came in at them, but it was weak and desultory. A missile salvo struck nearby, but did little more than kick up dirt and smoke.

‘Confirmed, Aug. We shall join you at the tip of the spear momentarily.’ He switched channels to his flanks. ‘Mechosa, Lumak.’

Both enemy flanks had capitulated to the intense pressure. The Iron Hands captains had begun an advance on the core. With Nuros also coming from the south, they had the Sons of Horus surrounded.

‘All forces converge on the municipal structure. We’re ending this.’

The traitors had mined the main approach to the municipal structure. A tectonic detonation rippled outwards from a concealed trigger plate as a bank of incendiaries went up, unleashing a ferocious firestorm.

Several Medusan Immortals fulfilled their final oaths and died in the blast. One of the Cataphractii-armoured Drakes fell too.

The losses stung, but Meduson remained undaunted. He took the lead now, Aug and Gorgonson at his side. If his reputation was to mean anything, he had to be in the front line when they met the traitors.

Meduson drew and raised his gladius. An old blade, as old as the Legion, it had been forged from the hardest Albian steel. Meduson used it as a talisman. Through the smoke and dying flames, the Iron Tenth pressed the advance.

A narrow gallery gave way to a much wider and longer hall. The allies spread out, moving slowly and cautiously, the cavernous chamber stretching before them. Gaps in the roof opened by stray ordnance let in hazy shafts of half-light

that picked out columnar statues, recently defaced. Dawn approached, slowly shedding light on more storage crates, stacked munitions and the full extent of the carnage.

Cracked flagstones echoed to the thud of armoured footfalls. Dust motes lingered like unquiet spirits.

An odd silence pervaded after the din of heavy explosives had ceased echoing. A vox crackle, augmented by a loudhailer, broke the false peace and brought the Iron Tenth to a halt. A voice rang out, thickly accented Cthonian. A gutter tongue, used by gangsters and thieves.

'*Welcome, cousins,*' it said. '*Surrounded, no quarter given… I think most of you know what that feels like. Now, so do we*.'

Several requests for permission to engage lit up on the Meduson's helm display. He denied every one. Even Lumak's. The mined entrance had been a salutary lesson he did not intend to ignore.

'*My name is Karbron Velx,*' said the traitor. '*I fought at Isstvan V, so did most of the men here. You killed many of my brothers during that fight, though you had the worst of it. Know that we are glad to join them! Know that we are not so blind as to let an enemy slip a blade into our backs. Come and die with us, if you are ready. We are.*' A sword scraped from Karbron Velx's scabbard, loud across the vox. '*Come and die with honour if you–*'

A chain of small explosions erupted in the ceiling above where the silhouettes of the traitors were lurking. Two ragged lines ran from corner to corner. A few looked up, Velx among them, at the hefty slabs of falling masonry from the roof. Dust and grit rained down, covering the traitors in filth, fouling auspex and sensors. A flock of warriors in shadow-black descended with it, their blades dulled so as not to reflect the light, filled with murderous intent.

A shout echoed in the traitor ranks, Velx's attempt to hold on to order. It fled almost as soon as Dalcoth and his Raven Guard were amongst them.

'Forward now!' roared Meduson, and took up a run.

So did his brothers. The hulking Cataphractii and the Immortals, burdened by their breacher shields, fell behind. The throaty burr of chainswords led them on, though. They had but to follow it.

A deadly fusillade of heavy las-fire cut angry streaks through the gloom as a battery of static rapier laser destroyers opened up. Its efficacy diminished almost immediately as Dalcoth's warriors saw to the heavy cannons. Secondary explosions threw off sporadic flares of light from detonating krak charges.

Eight Iron Hands had fallen in the first round of shots. If not for the Raven

Guard, it would have been more.

Meduson ran the hundred metres from the chamber entrance to his enemies in seconds. The last few he leapt, launching himself into a warrior in sea-green armour, plunging his sword into the gorget and out the other side. He wrenched it loose, jerking the blade so that it almost took off the cur's head.

Less than a second later, Aug had piled in. The rest of the charging Iron Hands came with him.

Aug's power axe took off a traitor's arm. A dead finger tightened around the trigger of the legionary's boltgun as it fell, releasing a burst that raked a second traitor, before Aug finished him with a blow that nearly split his torso down the sternum. He took a blow against his arm, and let the chain teeth snag against the metal before firing his pistol into his opponent's face.

Skirmishes erupted across the width of the hall as warriors from both sides engaged. Brief firearm bursts accompanied the regular clash of close combat weapons as a vicious melee unfolded.

The rapiers were all but silenced now, their crewmen seeing the futility of their old orders and drawing pistols and combat blades by way of improvisation. They were swept up by the Immortals, who crushed them with their breacher shields.

Dalcoth killed the leader. Meduson had been battering a way to him when a shadow descended from on high. Velx had offered up a war shout, raising his chainblade in salute. It had ended half-finished, his words trapped on a dead tongue inside a head separated from its host body.

The Sons of Horus had fought on to a man. Of course they had. They were traitors, but still Legiones Astartes. Horus had sown resilience into their ranks as well as misguided devotion and treachery.

The fight reached its death throes soon enough. A lone traitor, his left arm hung by a thread of sinew, his breastplate gouged and bleeding black, faced off against a pair of Raven Guard.

'Stand aside,' Dalcoth commanded, in that harsh and eerie way of his.

The two warriors did as bidden, withdrawing with blades held up protectively.

The Sons of Horus legionary had armed himself with a saw-toothed spatha. It was red and dripping.

'You wish to add to my tally?' breathed the renegade, his voice ragged and edgy. He swivelled the blade around in his hand, a needless half-circle flourish.

Dalcoth threw his tomahawk axe. He hissed, 'No.'

The two dark feathers protruding from the haft trembled a little as the weapon shivered, and the blade embedded itself in the traitor's skull.

Meduson retrieved Dalcoth's axe for him, stooping to wrench it noisily from the corpse.

'Fine throw,' he said, handing the weapon back to its owner.

Dalcoth gave a slight nod as he took the axe, depowering it before he sheathed the blade again.

'And a timely intervention also,' said Aug, standing straight with the pommel of his own, longer axe firmly planted in the ground.

'As I said, a hybridisation of tactics.'

Aug smiled at the Raven Guard captain. 'That you did, brother.'

Meduson nodded, pleased with everything they had wrought. He raised his voice and then his Albian sword. 'Another victory, another thorn for Horus and his lackeys to consider.'

'Meduson!' a solitary cry rang out a moment later.

'Meduson!' came the echo of several more voices.

'Meduson!' they chanted over and again, the entire chamber erupting in affirmation.

Their saviour kept his sword aloft, and revelled in the glory.

It took several hours to denude the last camp of everything of use that could reasonably be carried.

The Iron Tenth and their allies moved quickly. They would need to disband soon, scatter and then regroup again only when it had been deemed safe. Much-depleted supplies were gratefully replenished, the surplus designated to various hidden caches known only to certain captains and Iron Fathers.

Meduson had since left Hamart III and returned to the *Iron Heart*, his flagship. He was in the midst of accounting exactly how successful the raid had been when he heard footsteps at the door to his quarters.

'Yes?' he said, looking up as the door opened. 'Oh, Jebez. It's you.'

Jebez Aug framed a deep bow, prompting a curt and rueful laugh from his Warleader.

'Such deference,' said Meduson. 'I am no king, brother.'

'Forgive me,' said Aug, 'a mild jest. You appeared to revel in the role.'

Meduson returned to the reports he had laid out in front of him. He worked at a simple scribe's desk, and sat upon a reinforced stool.

'Hardly, brother.' He smiled, and gave Aug a half-glance. 'I am busy here with the paperwork.'

Aug laughed and joined him. Meduson watched the Iron Father keenly as he

absorbed the supply data.

'An impressive amount of plunder,' he conceded, and met the Warleader's gaze. Meduson held it for a few seconds. 'What are you looking for?' asked Aug, unflinching.

Meduson shrugged, returning to his reports.

'You look strong, Jebez. And you fought well.'

'Is that surprising?'

'No, but you were near broken after Oqueth. I am impressed with your recovery, that's all.'

'Then I am pleased to meet with your approval. Perhaps you will deign to share with me your plans? My mind is also fully recovered.'

'All in good time, Jebez. For now let us make a good account of our new supplies.'

'Of course,' Aug replied, his voice neutral. 'I might then have news that will interest you.' He laid a hololith orb in front of Meduson, who frowned as he picked it up.

'What is this?'

Aug pressed the activation stud and a galactic map shimmered into life projected from the orb, bathing the room and its occupants in a cone of grainy green light.

'A map,' he said. 'Routes of ships. An enemy flotilla. Some supply ships, some patrols. It was found inside a lock chest in an underground vault. Seal had to be burned off.'

Meduson looked askance at Aug, his interest piqued. 'Anything else in there?'

'Just this. I broke the security cipher myself. It took a little time, hence why I am only coming to you with this now.'

Gazing at the translucent image, Meduson rubbed thoughtfully at his chin.

'Is it verified?'

'As far as it can be,' replied Aug. 'It's authentic.'

Meduson regarded the image for a few more seconds before deactivating the device. Then he got to his feet.

'We have to act on this. Now.'

Aug frowned, unable to hide his alarm.

'Act how, exactly?'

'We take the flotilla. Gut it. It'll hurt them. It'll hurt *him*.'

'The entire flotilla?'

'What else?'

‘I thought the information could be used to avoid the larger patrols, or perhaps take a single ship. One of the stragglers. We hit it hard, then retreat like ghosts into the void.’

Meduson scoffed. ‘You sound like Dalcoth.’

‘Isn’t he one of your council?’

‘Yes, I only meant–’

‘Adapting our tactics has been working, Shadrak. This…’ Aug gestured to the empty space where the image had been. ‘This is beyond ambitious.’

‘It is. Which is why I need you to summon the other leaders. The de facto clan-fathers, the Iron Fathers, captains. Everyone in our ambit.’

‘For what exactly?’

‘To muster for an attack,’ said Meduson, an angry scowl creeping onto his face. ‘Is my every order to be questioned by my Hand Elect? Am I not Warleader? One voice, one purpose. It has been agreed.’

Aug held up his hands, contrite. ‘I apologise, Warleader. You are right, of course. It shall be done at once.’

Aug turned, about to leave when Meduson spoke.

‘Jebez, I am sorry. I misspoke. Perhaps I have been spending too much time with Lumak. His curt temper must be rubbing off on me. Please, brother–’

‘Understood,’ said Aug. He gave Meduson a weak smile. ‘All is well, Warleader. All is well. One voice, one purpose. You have guided us to glory. Please, do not concern yourself. I will see it done.’

He left and Meduson watched him go.

Recent events had taken a toll, he knew, and attacking the flotilla would not be easy, nor garnering support for the endeavour. But if it came at the cost of Aug’s friendship…

‘Damn it,’ he muttered, and returned to his reports.

THREE

The mountain, unknown

The cleft in the mountain gaped like an ugly wound, spitting fire and billowing smoke.

From sixty kilometres out, under a blood-red sky, it had appeared no wider than a crack, an insignificant fissure in the rock. Up close, it was a chasm of fathomless darkness and endless fire. Violence burned in those depths, and they promised only destruction.

A gunship fought against the flung dirt and burning air, its flanks relentlessly battered and stained with soot. It rolled hard against the currents, engines flaring as it turned its flank to the side of the mountain. The drake icon emblazoned on the side of the gunship caught the magma glow, flickering in lurid orange light that bled in through the viewslits.

Though the ship trembled, the two warriors in its hold were unmoved.

Zytos leaned on his thunder hammer, the head of the weapon steady against the quivering deck. His large gauntleted hands wrapped the pommel, one atop the other, clenching and unclenching. His helm sat alongside him, snarling at shadows, mag-locked to the grav-bench.

His forehead touched the scalloped knuckles of his gauntlets. Eyes closed, he breathed slowly and calmly through his mouth, filling the hold with the scent of ash and cinder. Those of Vulkan's bloodline were said to breathe the fire of the mountain. In this way, it was true.

Abidemi sang. Sitting opposite his sergeant, he bellowed above the roar of the storm outside, singing of Nocturne and the deep drakes, of their majesty and fearsome, elemental power. He held the sword *Draukoros*, sheathed across his

lap, in both hands. It had been Numeon's blade once, but now it had passed to another, to be wielded in his name. Abidemi had no doubt that when his end came at last, a different warrior would take up the sword. It was a dragontooth, a kind of Nocturnean blade only a few smiths knew how to forge. Its serrated edge could even cut bonded ceramite and adamantium.

Salamanders liked to name their weapons – not an uncommon trait amongst the Legions, but a tradition no warrior of the XVIII would ever eschew. Strength resided in names. The better the name, the greater the strength. A sword was just a sword until its naming. Then it became something *other*. It gained a spirit.

'Gargo,' Zytos said, rasping but making himself heard across the vox. He never opened his eyes and only moved his lips to speak, a statue of onyx and dark jade sitting on the grav-bench, growing impatient.

Abidemi stopped singing, and merely sat, eyes blazing into the darkness.

'*Am I to ride into the burning chasm of fire, brother?*' asked Igen Gargo from the pilot's throne.

'You are to do Vulkan's will,' Zytos replied, still unmoving.

'*I cannot see him or hear him to know his precise will, brother.*'

'Our black-smiter sounds a little… strained,' offered Abidemi.

Zytos smiled. 'Should I be more empathic?' he asked.

Abidemi leaned back on the grav-bench as far as his armour's generator would allow. He feigned nonchalance.

'Oh, I would not go that far. But I have a keen desire not to crash upon Deathfire's crags. At the least, I think Vulkan would look down on that.'

Now Zytos laughed, raising his eyes and favouring Abidemi with a feral grin.

'Death upon the flanks of the mountain or death inside the mountain – it is still death.'

Abidemi thought on that, and gave a facial shrug.

'Well, as we are born in fire…'

Zytos nodded, his gentle gibing at Gargo's expense at an end.

'Ash and flame it is then,' he said, and raised the vox again. 'Into the chasm, black-smiter. Into the flame and the hells of Deathfire. That is where our father awaits us.'

Gargo did not reply. He heard Abidemi's singing across the vox and gave a fierce grin.

The gunship banked, stabilisers flaring urgently as it turned sharply and growled with sudden and violent thrust.

They speared towards the crack in the mountain. Flames lapped at the hull, searing fresh burns into the armour plates. Chunks of cinder fell upon the prow, some embedding themselves, still burning as the gunship flew on. The roar of the furious earth rose to a crescendo that shivered bone and rattled the hull as though a giant shook it in an angry fist. Smoke descended, a crackling, black miasma of pyroclastic cloud that enveloped the gunship, smothering it utterly.

Every augur died at once, and the darkness became abject as the gunship entered the mountain and disappeared.

From the pilot's throne, Gargo saw only darkness through the viewing pane. A bank of soot and ash rolled over the glacis, smearing his only means of guiding a vessel bereft of its sensors.

It was the very definition of flying blind. He trusted to sound instead, listening to the pitch and yaw as the hot air inside the mountain pulled at the gunship. He fought it, striving not to overcompensate and throw them into solid rock.

The gunship was a Thunderhawk. A pugnacious vessel, it had seen some use in the war, despite being a less-favoured option during the Great Crusade. It lacked the size and brute strength of a Stormbird, but possessed greater manoeuvrability. Hardy as it no doubt was, a collision inside the burning interior of a volatile volcano would see it destroyed. So Gargo listened and tried very hard not to crash, and to die.

After almost a minute, the viewing pane began to clear, the soot burned off by the heat of the lava-filled chasm rushing up to meet them.

Gargo gritted his teeth, hauling on the flight stick. 'Blood of Nocturne!'

A sharp ascent provoked a shriek of disquiet from the engines, but the deathly plunge to certain immolation had been averted.

Easing back on the throttle, his hearts steady, Gargo appraised their surroundings… and felt awe.

A cavern yawned before them, immense, as large as a city. Crags encroached upon it, great rending claws reaching into smoke-shrouded depths. Below, a lava sea spat tendrils of flame as molten rock slid through its burning currents. Pillars of fire rose up, magnificent but ultimately ephemeral. Clouds of sulphurous gas expanded from gigantic fumaroles, thick and coiling like whirlwinds slowed in time, each turn bringing them closer to dissolution only for new plumes to emerge in the wake of their passing. A vault above strained with spears of rock, an army of stalactites dripping with caustic and corrosive vapours.

Majestic as it surely was, the cavern paled in comparison to its denizens.

Through languid palls of ash black, Gargo saw them… Gargantuan. Armoured in hoary, overlapping scales each at least as large as a breacher shield. Teeth as long as spears. Hunched in hollows and caves, their eyes flashed like flaming rubies. Hissing saliva drooled from their fanged mouths, corroding the rock where it made contact. Their dark, leathery tongues lashed the air as if seeking to taste the morsel in their midst.

A few stirred to bellow their discontent, their stentorian calls resonating through the rock. The majority merely bore witness. Unsurprisingly, they seemed unconcerned.

'Leviathan…' Gargo whispered.

Few had ever seen these deep drakes, let alone done so and lived. Here, Gargo rode the ship through an entire nest. In their blindness, the Salamanders had descended farther than he realised.

'Brothers,' he dared utter, though he kept his voice quiet across the vox. Out of caution or reverence, he could not say for certain.

One of the larger drakes uncoiled, serpentine and magnificent. The gunship would have fit into its mouth entire. It eyed them with fascination and belligerence as it slid into the lava sea, a great horned tail following in its wake as it swam into the depths.

'*It is almost beyond my reckoning,*' Zytos hissed. '*Tread warily here, Gargo. This is no longer a realm of men.*'

'How many do you think there are?' asked Gargo.

'*Enough to rend apart this ship and us with it many times over,*' Zytos replied.

Abidemi had no words, stunned into silence at what lay beyond the viewslits.

The cavern felt endless, and where the lava sea met its edge it spilled ferociously into an even deeper well. A vibrant, trembling heat flickered up from this pit suggesting more flame at its nadir through the occluding darkness.

Gargo led them into it, easing the gunship into a gentle descent, spiralling into the void below rather than arrowing headlong.

A crag of rock jutted from the pit wall, flattened into a rugged plateau and revealed in a brief parting of black smoke.

'Blood of Nocturne!' he swore, as he saw a figure calmly standing upon the rock, as incongruous here in this underworld as the gunship itself.

Vulkan had armoured himself, and held a hammer close to his breast as he watched the gunship descend. As it came closer, the Lord of Drakes raised the weapon and Gargo kept the vessel steady as he engaged the forward ramp.

'Is it him?' asked Abidemi as they drew nearer and all the finery of the

primarch's craft and artisanal skill became apparent in his armour.

Zytos frowned as he turned to the other. 'Who else would it be?'

'No,' uttered Abidemi, his tone suggesting to Zytos a question meant for long before this moment, 'is it *him?*'

There was no time for Zytos to consider his answer. Up close, it became obvious that the promontory Vulkan had chosen was crumbling. Soon it would be no more. The fiery depths below seemed bottomless. The primarch looked unconcerned as the prow of the gunship opened to admit him, and with a single bound he was aboard.

He had leapt into a crouch, head down, hammer across his bent knee. Behind him, seen by Zytos and Abidemi through the closing ramp, the plateau fragmented and collapsed. It fell slowly, reluctantly, but disappeared into darkness all the same.

'Father,' said Zytos, genuflecting before his primarch. Abidemi mimicked him.

'Rise, both of you,' said Vulkan, his gaze as forbidding as the deep drakes they had seen in the cavern, and much more fearsome.

Vigour emanated off Vulkan, as hot and vibrant as the flaming core of the mountain from which he had seemingly been reborn. An almost otherworldly aura pervaded in his presence, a shimmering of vitality as of a blade freshly forged and gleaming.

He was resplendent, a feral king in his finest panoply of war.

They obeyed, almost without thinking.

Vulkan arose too, his long cape of drakehide unfurling like a banner behind him, his stature dwarfing that of his sons. The splinter had gone from his chest, and was instead sheathed at his belt like a gladius. He wore an amulet too, a large disc engraved with the image of seven hammers.

The primarch's drakescale-green armour was veined with gold. Dragons and their kin had been graven upon its plates. His scalloped gauntlets ended in claws, and a long-snouted helm clung to his thigh, draconic, its teeth bared in anger. Red eye slits glared from its faceplate, impassive, unforgiving.

'Three suns,' he said, his voice as deep as thunder. 'You came.'

At first Zytos mistook his meaning. 'As you asked us to, my lord. We spoke to no others of your miraculous return.'

Vulkan nodded, his hand upon the side of the hull.

'A good ship,' he said, silently appraising. 'It will serve us well.'

'*Vulcanis*,' said Gargo, giving its name.

'But I would ask how it shall serve, Lord Vulkan,' said Zytos. 'I am yet to

understand how we will find the shadowed road.'

Vulkan clapped a gauntlet on his shoulder.

'Soon, I promise, Barek, you will know everything. And you, Atok,' he said, glancing at Abidemi. 'No secrets will be kept from my sons, but we cannot linger here. It is more dangerous than you could know.' He smiled, and in a way the expression terrified Zytos. 'We must head deeper.'

Gargo flew them into the pit, with only Vulkan's voice across the vox a light with which to navigate the underworld.

Great oceans of lava roared in the darkness, throwing off light enough to deepen the shadows but nothing more. Endless tracts of smoke rolled across the ship, sparking with pieces of burning material, thickened by ash.

On Gargo flew, Vulkan at his ear, guiding the ship with his voice. Deeper still, and the mountain had yet to reach its nadir. A sense of otherness intruded on the Salamanders that Vulkan appeared oblivious to, or was studiously ignoring. The rock formations subtly changed, and had more in kind with rugged scale. Crags many times larger than the gunship drooled, slick, smooth and not at all like stone or earth. More like bone. Caves gaped invitingly, their wide arching mouths ringed with bony stalactites and stalagmites, oddly ranked and partially uniform. Sulphurous gas exuded in heavy exhalations, slow and regular. Vulkan steered Gargo through fissures and clefts, ancient tunnels, but stayed away from the fanged cave mouths and said nothing of why.

As they flew low across a river of lava, a hump bulged up from the morass, huge, forbidding, barely visible in the dark.

'Cleave to the tunnel edge, Igen,' whispered Vulkan, and Zytos could not force down a tremor of unease at the primarch's sudden caution.

The lava mound rose a little higher, and a dark slit appeared across its middle. A membrane slid slowly over it, revealing an oily sclera. Then the mound submerged, an island sinking beneath the sea, and Vulkan raised his voice from a whisper again.

Zytos said nothing of this, and only realised how tightly he had gripped his hammer when he heard the creak of protesting metal. He released the breath he had been holding and spoke, his voice harsh and low.

'Is this the shadowed road?'

Certainly the soot and drifting palls of ash lent it that quality.

'We are close,' said Vulkan. 'Only a little farther now.'

Abidemi gave Zytos an incredulous look, and made a gesture to the primarch.

Vulkan's eyes were closed.

Beyond the viewslits, the tunnel walls trembled. At first, Zytos thought it was heat haze but then he knew it was something else entirely.

'It's moving,' he said, still unable to do much more than rasp. 'The rock, it is…'

'Alive?' Vulkan suggested.

Zytos nodded. Vulkan must have heard it in the growl and purr of his armour, for he answered.

'It is not rock, Barek.'

'Then, what–' Abidemi began.

'They are the world serpents, the eldest of all the ur-drakes of Nocturne, so old they have passed into myth.'

'I can see them, lord. They are not myth.'

Vulkan laughed, echoing, unnerving.

'All in this place is myth,' he said. 'None but you here have ever seen it. These ur-drakes *are* Nocturne. They coil around its heart, forever entwined, their breaths the very movement of the earth.'

He turned, and his eyes flared red like two blazing forge fires.

'Are you disturbed by this, my sons?'

'It is beyond my understanding,' said Zytos, looking down disbelievingly at his hand as it trembled.

Dryness crept into his throat, nullifying speech.

Abidemi clung to Numeon's sword, fingers taut on both hands, but did not answer either.

'It is beyond primal,' Vulkan told them, 'beyond even my father's gene-craft to fully inure you against.'

'I find the feeling… unfamiliar,' Zytos replied, but ceased the trembling in his hand. He snarled as if rejecting the sensation.

'Rest easy, my sons. The ur-drakes sleep, and have done for thousands of years. You merely witness their slumber, the dreaming of god-beasts.'

'And what, my lord,' said Abidemi, 'do such things dream of?'

Vulkan's teeth shone brightly, a white crescent cutting through the shadows.

'Fire.'

As they passed beyond the long tunnel and entered a broader, lightless chamber, Gargo took the ship to the edge of the lava river. A gelatinous cataract fed down from it into a shallow basin, spilling across a flat stump of rock that diverted the languid flow to either side of a monstrous cliff.

‘This is it,’ said Vulkan. ‘Follow the cliff all the way to the bottom, Igen.’

The gunship banked at first then slowly came around, angling into a patient descent that followed the sheer face of the cliff. A belt of cloud impeded the viewing pane but passed in seconds. Then came another and another, the gunship spearing each fresh veil until a massive cavern appeared through the dregs of clinging ash.

A great magma sea spread across the cavern floor, fuming, shrouded and undulant. A glow bathed the cavern walls, the shadows cast upon it flickering as if they were possessed. A flat, circular plateau of stone jutted up from the burning sea like a pugnacious chin. It shone with obsidian lustre, the veins of volcanic glass reaching the cliff and colonising it.

‘Here,’ said Vulkan. ‘Put us down here, Igen.’

Descent thrusters flaring, the gunship raised its prow as it came down to land. Clawed stanchions extended from beneath the hull, digging into rock, grasping for purchase, a bird of prey rendered in adamantium.

As the turbofans died to a low whir, the disturbed ash and grit falling into gentle eddies, the forward ramp opened and the gunship settled into position.

Vulkan emerged first, unblinking into the magma light.

Zytos followed, taking in everything beyond the confines of the hold. He wore his helm now, observing pointedly that his primarch did not.

‘My lord, the atmosphere…’ he began, his armour alerting him to the extreme heat and the concentrations of toxic volcanic gases in the air.

Vulkan waved away his concerns before they could be voiced.

‘It is a small matter, Barek. ‘Keep your war-helm on, my son.’

Abidemi joined him, Gargo a moment later from the cockpit. Paint blistered where it was thinnest at the gunship’s hard edges. Bare metal glinted through in sliver slashes.

‘He is unhelmed,’ said Gargo quietly, gesturing to the primarch.

‘I know,’ Zytos replied, his eye venturing ahead of Vulkan.

Past the plateau of rock where their vessel had alighted, a few crudely hewn steps led up to a pillar of stone, a gently smoking caldera at the summit. The blood of the mountain had grown thin here, little more than pale yellow sulphurous deposits, and Zytos felt his heart warn him of something momentous as he caught sight of the shape worn into the middle of the caldera.

Anthropomorphic, almost foetal in aspect…

He did not dare to wonder, though he looked askance at his primarch.

Vulkan paid him no heed. The primarch’s attention had fallen upon a spire of

rock thrusting up from the lava. Then, as if he were expecting to see something but had found it absent, he looked away. He stopped at the edge of the plateau and turned to his sons.

'This is the deep forge, the Maw,' he told them, gesturing to a thin path that led from the plateau to an antechamber feeding off from the main cavern. 'It is where I forged my armour.'

Zytos saw an anvil, the tools of a smith laid neatly upon its face. Its edges still glowed with the act of forging and he could scarcely comprehend what sort of wonders might have been wrought here.

Vulkan's voice arrested his brief reverie. 'Come, my sons,' he said, beckoning them to his side. A second set of steps on the opposite side of the plateau to the path that led to the forge, beaten smooth by repeated and monumental impacts, wended down to a chasm broad enough to admit the gunship.

Within the chasm stood a crooked arch of night-black stone.

Gems encrusted the arch, some as large as Zytos' war-helm, others the size of his clenched fist. Sickly green light emanated from the gems. Runes had been etched into the stone face, which was smooth and somehow organic.

'Bone,' he said disbelievingly. 'This is fashioned of bone.' He turned to Vulkan, who was watching him pensively. 'I know of only one race that crafts with bone.'

'The eldar,' said Gargo, clenching the spear he had brought from the gunship a little tighter. It was the same one he had taken from the rig of the jetbike, only made more ornate, with a flamer attached to the haft below the speartip.

'An eldritch gate,' Vulkan said. 'It has been here since before the days of the N'bel, hidden beneath the heart-blood of Deathfire. Slavers who once ravaged Nocturne used it. Our ancient tribesmen had no defence against such art.'

'Cowards,' spat Zytos.

During the Great Crusade, Zytos had liberated many worlds that had fallen under the yoke of the eldar. He had fought the aliens gladly, and though some in the Legion held to the belief that the eldar were a schismatic race, split into disparate factions, he saw no distinction. This gate, though, had all the trappings of a darker aspect of the eldritch creatures. Its very appearance was offensive.

'Have you brought us here to destroy it, father?' asked Abidemi, his hand around the hilt of *Draukoros*.

'No,' said Gargo, lessening his grip on the spear. 'He means for us to use it, don't you, my lord?'

Vulkan nodded. 'It has been broken for an age, sealed here in the nadir of the

world. It is how we reach the shadowed road. Commorragh.'

'And from there?' asked Zytos, unable to take his eyes from the gate for fear of what might come out of it.

Vulkan let the pommel of his hammer hit the ground. The blow resonated down the haft with a low but defining chime of metal.

'Terra.'

The chime continued, echoing and intensifying. Underfoot, the rock began to tremble.

'Have no fear, my sons,' Vulkan assured them. 'It will not stand after our passage through it, but we must act swiftly.'

Zytos felt the first stirrings of a gentle wind against his face and then saw a crackle of dark light manifesting in the crook of the archway. It grew larger, splitting in several directions like caged lightning. The wind grew into a tumult, deathly cold in spite of the mountain, in spite of his armour. Hoar frost began to form upon his faceplate. Below, the earth rumbled with thunderous intent. Eldritch winter and primordial fire warred for dominance.

Vulkan took up his hammer, a fragment of rock pinging off his shoulder guard from above like rain.

'It is time to leave.'

None argued, though Gargo glanced up at the falling rock.

'Igen…' Vulkan gently urged.

As if woken from a dream, Gargo nodded and made for the gunship still idling on the plateau.

By the time the primarch and his legionaries were aboard, and the gunship had begun to rise, a storm raged inside the confines of the eldritch gate. Zytos saw it as the ramp closed, a crackling maelstrom of dark lightning resembling a forbidding horizon. Then the hold sealed closed and it disappeared from view.

The gunship began a ponderous turn, fighting the searing updraughts coming off the mountain, its turbofans beating furiously. Falling rock battered the hull as it tried to gain more loft.

Zytos exchanged a look with Abidemi, whose gaze barely left the ceiling of the hold.

We stay here much longer and we don't leave, his eyes said.

A spit of flame caught Zytos' eye through a viewslit. It speared upwards, a pillar of fire reaching into the vaults of the cavern, a lava sea in turmoil.

A second geyser burst forth a moment later, a long plume of burning magma.

Then came a third, a fourth, until pillars of fire were surging from the mantle of Nocturne in a sustained frenzy of volcanic eruption.

The gunship banked urgently, its right wing dipping with a sudden burst of its left thruster. A spit of flame roared across its armoured flank as the plateau cracked apart and surrendered to the lava sea. Zytos felt the heat prickle his skin through his war-helm. For a few seconds the darkness of the hold retreated before a harsh flare of light.

If they were to die here, then at least they would die with Vulkan.

Despite the angry trembling of the gunship and the unfettered fury of the mountain as it reached out to impale them on spears of flame, the primarch crouched in silence. He sank to one knee in the middle of the hold, hammer braced across his leg, unmoving.

Zytos glanced across the hold where Abidemi had taken up a place on the grav-bench. Zytos did the same, the shriek of warning sirens within almost forgotten amidst the rising tumult outside. He set his thunder hammer as he had before, the walls shuddering so hard they rattled his teeth. His skull ached. He lowered his head as he had before. He closed his eyes as he had before. He grew still.

Abidemi sang. He sang of Nocturne, and the deep drakes. He sang of the old tribes. Voice rising against the bellow of the mountain, he sang without cease as the engines roared with furious exhalation and sent them headlong into an eldritch storm.

Fire, light and fury disappeared. Only darkness remained.

Narek of the Word had reached the foot of the mountain when he heard the thunder. A battered Scimitar-pattern jetbike lay behind him, its fuel reserves spent, its gravitic engines no longer capable of keeping it aloft. He had used it, like he used all things, until it was exhausted. So even if he could have reached the jetbike, it would not matter.

Craning his neck, he looked up and cursed under his breath.

He had already waited out the storm. The mountain was supposed to be still, and yet it raged anew.

Halfway across a slope of jagged scree, Narek felt the earth rumble beneath him. Above, the mountain roared and the fissure in its rocky flank he had been heading towards gave vent. A swathe of bile-yellow cloud and choking ash spewed outwards, eclipsing the meagre light of the sun.

As he had tracked the gunship earlier he had seen no sign of shelter on the desolate plain. Finding the jetbike had been fortunate, that its rider had been

alone even more so. He had killed the warrior without wasting a round. A huntsman must be as proficient with his knife as he is with his rifle. All Vigilators knew that, and Narek was no ordinary Vigilator.

Still, his skill with either would not help him now. Nor, he suspected, would his power armour. A sand cloak, taken from the dead rider, had kept out most of the drifting ash but it had already been damaged before he reached this grey desert, and several of his suit's mechanisms now growled in pain whenever he moved. Narek had left the rider's mantle of lizard-hide. Dishonour had its limits he had decided. He regretted doing so now for it might have provided some additional protection.

He glanced east, across his battered shoulder guard.

The gully where he had taken refuge before was far away, and he sensed another cataclysm was imminent. To remain where he was also only ended one way. That left the fissure. He had watched the gunship fly into it, and so surmised that whatever lay beyond offered a greater chance of survival than he had currently. Then again, the XVIII Legion were masochists and fatalists after a fashion… For all Narek knew they had flown into the mountain to commit suicide.

Some of his former cousins were very strange. Not just the former ones, come to think of it.

He ran, the sand cloak fluttering wildly behind him, his long-barrelled rifle slung across his back and locked to his failing generator. His armour gave an audible groan. Every greave and joint shrieked in protest.

'Shut up,' snarled Narek, as he quickly clambered up the rugged slope.

Behind him, he felt the earth crack and a heat warning flared bright in his retinal lens display.

He ran faster.

A fumarole vented on his right, pushing him left to avoid a dousing of caustic acids. The reek of burnt ceramite came through his rebreather and a damage sigil flashed.

He pressed on, almost arachnid-like, scurrying beneath a cascade of falling rock. A cloud of ash engulfed him, the pall too wide to avoid, and he engaged prey-sight to better navigate his suddenly pitch-dark surroundings.

'Fiery hells,' he swore, his world reduced to degrees of light, and smiled at the irony of his words.

A crag loomed up ahead, its outline dark against the intense magnesium-white behind it, and Narek readied himself for a climb. He drew his knife, holding it

reversed in his grip and reasoning it might find purchase where his hands could not. About to make the leap, he stopped as the earth parted and a ragged crevasse opened in his path. He almost fell, so violent was its birth, and took a knee to steady himself.

The crevasse yawned wide, a maw filled with undulant and thrashing light. Heat warnings spiked across his retinal lenses as the crag seemed to retreat from him.

The fissure lay beyond the crag, but he could barely see it. The crag lay well beyond his reach.

Narek looked behind him and found a rivulet of lava hemming him in. The rock underfoot had fallen away before and behind, until only a diminishing atoll remained with Narek at the very edge of its curve.

He had come here to kill a primarch. In a galaxy and a war that had increasingly lost all meaning, it was the one thing he could cleave to. That mission had failed, which left but one recourse.

Narek stood up. He reached for his gorget and unclamped his helm, letting it fall from his gauntleted fingers as soon as it was removed.

Then he laughed.

He laughed loudly and ruefully, cursing all the fates that had led him here, and vowing to seek vengeance against them all if there was vengeance to be had beyond death. His former cousins in the XVIII seemed to think so. Perhaps they were not as mad as Narek supposed.

'Come then, fire,' he shouted, unrepentant as all of his past deeds were laid before him in his mind's eye. 'Come then, death. Come then, hell, and see if you are worthy of Barthusa Narek!'

He closed his eyes, and felt only peace before the end…

Until he heard a voice. 'Not yet.'

Narek opened his eyes. The tumult of the volcano seemed dulled, as though it were being heard from a distance or under the sea.

An old man faced him, a wizened looking creature with thin, frail arms, wearing a grubby wrapping of robes and holding a gnarled staff.

'I had expected death to look more formidable,' said Narek honestly.

'Not yet, Bearer of the Word. You cannot die yet.'

It struck Narek that the old man should either have choked to death on the fumes or shrivelled in the searing heat, but he appeared unharmed and unconcerned. That alone made Narek attend to his words.

Perhaps I have gone mad, he considered.

The old man's eyes narrowed, and it was only then that Narek noticed their shape and hue.

'You are not mortal,' he said, only half-aware of the slowly sundering earth around him. If he was dead anyway and this some profoundly strange rite of passage into hell, then he would let it run its course.

'I am mortal, just not as you are. But my provenance and fate are unimportant. It is your purpose that concerns us now.'

'Purpose?' Narek frowned, the burning sensation against his skin had lessened. Even the ash and rain of failing debris spewed up from the mountain had slowed to a near-glacial pace. 'Who are you? Why aren't you dead?'

The old man smiled, as if such questions were unimportant.

'Have no fear, Bearer of the Word,' he said, reaching up to place his hand upon Narek's chest. An icon of a book had been emblazoned there once. 'There is more than one path off Nocturne.'

'I fear nothing.'

'I believe you. I suggest you close your eyes.'

'Close my wh–'

Time resumed its inexorable pace, and Narek closed his eyes as a veil of pyroclastic cloud fell over him and the roar of the mountain grew so loud it turned to silence.

FOUR

Flesh and iron, unalloyed

It begins with darkness.

Darkness above, torn by cracks of light given a thunderous announcement.

Darkness below, thicker, more tangible, ever-shifting.

His armour is painted in it, the darkness of below somehow blacker than his proud livery.

On hands and knees, he tries to rise but is unable. Another blow comes down and there is pain. It wars with anger, disgust, outrage and grief. An emotional kaleidoscope difficult to process, impermeable to cold logic.

Wrath prevails instead, hot and welcome. Necessary. Essential to survival.

The Son of Iron scrambles, crawling like a wretch between greaves and boots. Iron fingers reach out in a claw, a fistful of blood-soaked earth their reward.

He rises to his feet, a firm hand upon his elbow providing needed support. The burr of a chainaxe grows loud in his ear. A grieving brother takes the blow and the hot splash of his final moments strikes the Son of Iron's face like rain.

He wavers, drunk on grief, but anguish drives him on. His goal is close. He can see it, not so distant now, though it feels like he has crossed a gulf to get this far. Others close upon it too. Not all are kin, and their butchery is different to what the Son of Iron has in mind.

He lashes out, skill forgotten but rage lending the blow strength enough to break his enemy's guard. The Son of Iron does not wait for the body to fall. Its blood paints him, overlaying the darkness, and that is enough. Instead, he keeps going until he reaches his goal.

On hands and knees again. It feels like cheap reverence, and so he pulls forth his knife and begins the cut. A piece has already been removed but the nipping

dog who took it has already fled with his prize. An old adage pierces the overwhelming fog, which parts reluctantly in the face of reason.

Sinews part, more akin to cables of metal than flesh. The blood is hot, hot enough to leave a scar. It sears armour meant to be proof against acid. With a last jerk of the knife, the prize comes free. It shimmers, cold to the touch but not dead. No, something dwells within still. The Son of Iron tries not to succumb to awe, his face reflected back at him. It is bloodstained, harrowed, a wraith that speaks and walks as a man.

He flees, falling more than once, a ring of Iron brothers his bulwark against the hungry pack in his wake.

He scrambles upwards. The mound of the dead yields under boot and gauntlet as limbs part or bodies slide. It has grown high, much higher than he remembered. A monument to slaughter.

A roar sounds overhead and the backwash of engines brings with it the reek of oil and blood. A doorway opens. More darkness within, unquiet, screaming, accusatory, promising hollow vengeance.

He staggers inside, his burden heavy but weightless.

Hands reach for him. Fingers are missing from some, but their owners lend aid with what they have.

Then he falls, and a different kind of darkness takes him.

Aug awoke, the quietly whirring cogitator next to him a reassuring presence.

He consulted a diagnostic via a data-screed that scrolled across his left eye. His bionics read as optimal. Blood pressure and heart rates appeared elevated, but had begun to normalise. Adrenaline levels suggested he had recently been in combat, but the *Iron Heart's* apothecarion had been his cloister for the last seven hours. The chrono overlaying the inner sclera of his right eye confirmed it.

'Your biochemistry is concerning, brother.'

Aug opened his eyes, his flesh eyes, as he heard Gorgonson's grating voice.

'I feel strong,' said Aug, and knew he looked it too.

The Apothecary of Clan Lokopt looked pensive but gave nothing of his inner thoughts away. They were alone in the apothecarion, Gorgonson sitting in front of Aug, who reclined on a medi-slab, his flesh and augmetics linked up to the diagnostic machines.

Aug sat up and started to remove the wires. His flesh-spare frame barely resisted. The cogitator gave out a terminal whine before Gorgonson silenced it.

'Not much blood…' he mused aloud.

‘I lost a lot on Oqueth,’ Aug replied, a half-smile curling his lip.

Gorgonson frowned, and glanced down at the data-slate in his left hand.

‘Humour still intact,’ he muttered. ‘At least the tech-priests on Lliax left you with something.’

‘And gave me a lot more besides,’ said Aug, reaching out to touch Gorgonson on the shoulder. His attempt at reassurance failed.

‘If you’re going to tell me that I need not be concerned,’ said the Apothecary, a dour look upon his grizzled face, ‘then you will waste your breath. It is my *duty* to be concerned. Any procedure, however small, that I have no knowledge of is a risk. The fact that your augmentation on Lliax was extensive makes it doubly so.’

‘My *restoration,* Goran. Magos Dominos Pharmakos saved my life and returned me to the war, to Shadrak’s side. What risk is there in that?’

Gorgonson was not about to be placated.

‘I don’t know, brother, and that is the issue. There is much that remains secret about the Martian Mechanicum.’

Aug let him go. ‘Then use the evidence of your eyes. What do they tell you?’

‘That you are hale and hearty in body…’

Aug smiled, believing he had made his point and that would be the end of it. Gorgonson’s troubled expression told him otherwise.

‘But that your mental trauma is yet to be fully accounted for,’ he concluded. ‘Wounds as severe as yours… They leave a mark, scars that go beyond the flesh.’

‘I assure you, Goran, if I need your ministration or counsel I shall ask for it.’ Aug looked him in the eye. ‘I mean that sincerely.’

Gorgonson held his gaze, as if measuring Aug’s words and finding they held the appropriate weight of truth.

He nodded. ‘Be sure that you do.’ He pulled away from the medi-slab, leaving Aug enough room to get up. ‘I am finished for now. But I want to see you back here after the council.’ He went to attend to his equipment, sighing at its patchwork nature and the level of disrepair. ‘It’s a miracle I can heal anything with this,’ he chuntered to himself. ‘At least we have plenty of hacksaws.’

‘Are you this diligent with all of your patients, Goran?’

Gorgonson gave Aug a sideways look.

‘Only those I like,’ he replied.

Aug smirked. ‘You don’t like any of them.’

Gorgonson frowned, as he considered his answer. Then, shrugging, he said,

‘True.’

Aug’s laughter echoed all the way from the apothecarion to the *Iron Heart’*s bridge.

They were running dark, the ship as benighted as the void.

Meduson stood on the command dais, slightly elevated above the rest of the bridge, ringed by an atoll of sparsely manned servitor pits and bare-bones crew stations. Apart from the dull glow of instrumentation and the ambient light of distant stars coming through the large, curved viewport at the bridge’s prow-facing aspect, the only other illumination issued from the four hololiths Meduson consulted.

Each was a cone of hazy green light, projected from an array built into the forward half of the dais. Meduson stood in the middle, facing an arc of Iron Hands officers in simulated form. His arms were by his sides, fists tightly balled.

He was late. A failure in the plasma drives. Unforeseen. Rectifiable, but not without incurring delay. The engines had been set to full burn, a risk on account of their magnified heat signature, but Meduson had clawed back a few days. Not enough, it seemed.

‘*We cannot linger*,’ said the ghost of Naduul Norsson. Even via the imperfect capture of the hololith array, the Iron Father of Atraxii had a stern disposition. His mouth was a pursed, thin line, his eyes perpetually narrowed, one of them irrevocably bloodshot.

A partially flayed scalp, fraught with scarring, betrayed his battle history. Tufts of wiry hair stuck up from a pallid, shaven skull. He had not even set foot on Isstvan V, but bore the wounds of that battle nonetheless. Even the escape, the atmospheric engagement that had unfolded once the truth of Horus’ betrayal had been revealed, had been a massacre. Few ever spoke of that fight though, despite the thousands who had died.

‘*Three days you have had us here,*’ Raask Arkborne of Felg agreed. The Frater’s left ocular bionic constantly flared and refocused, the outward signs of dysfunction impossible to mask. His bionic arm lay across his chest, the elbow bent as if held by an invisible sling. Every few seconds, one of the fingers twitched, an involuntary misfire of the nerve/augmetic receptor interface.

‘Three days,’ said Kuleg Rawt of Clan Raukaan, the emphasis unnecessary. ‘*Three days for the Sons of Horus to find us and kill us. They will be hunting after what we did on Hamart. Out for blood.*’

Next to the others, Rawt looked almost unscathed, possessing no obvious

bionics. Beneath his armour was another matter, though. He had one hand on a long-hafted power axe, its ferrule resting against the deck, though that was lost in the haze of the dissolving hololithic feed which ended at Rawt's greaves. He also wore the Eye of Vigilance on his breastplate, a dubious honour, justly given and now rightly besmirched. An eye, *the* eye, encircled by a cog signified that Rawt had once fought beside Horus. Now it served as a potent reminder of his vow to kill the Warmaster and deface the medal with the primarch's treacherous blood.

'I am surprised there is any left in your veins, Iron Father,' snapped Meduson, instantly regretting both his tone and his words.

The hololith of Rawt flickered angrily as if echoing the mood of the Iron Father.

'*And some believe your blood is overly hot, Meduson.*'

'You will address him as Warleader,' snarled Lumak. He stood behind Meduson's left shoulder, a hulking, glowering presence, utterly unapologetic.

Rawt's gaze and the gazes of the other Iron Fathers who had taken the reins from their former clan-fathers, slain during the massacre at Oqueth, turned on the Avernii captain.

Meduson braced himself for the coming tirade, silently cursing Lumak and wondering if it was too late to simply push him from an airlock.

No point, he realised, *he would probably take up argument with the stars instead and incur the wrath of the void itself*.

To Meduson's profound surprise, Rawt did not react. At least not with remonstration or rebuke. He acquiesced.

'*Apologies, Warleader,*' he said, his gaze lingering on Lumak before he looked back at Meduson. '*I think I speak for all here present when I say the last few weeks have been fraught. After Oqueth, caution is only logical.*'

And natural, thought Meduson, realising logic was half the issue.

The other two Iron Fathers nodded their assent.

'I understand your concerns, Fraters. This is the largest gathering of Iron Hands and allied assets since…' He paused, reluctant to commit to the name.

'*Isstvan*,' said the fourth figure, his voice distorted and distant. A jerking, crackling wraith, plagued by a weak signal. '*The largest gathering since Isstvan*.'

Meduson turned to the hololith and nodded. 'Yes, Frater Kernag. Since Isstvan.

'But it is vital we meet,' Meduson asserted, 'and so I ask for forbearance, and two more days.'

The hololiths nodded as one, Kernag's dispersing to static as the unstable signal failed. The others lingered only a little longer, long enough for Rawt to say, '*Two days, Warleader, or we shall have no choice but to abandon this place and reconvene at another.*'

The hololiths dissolved, plunging Meduson into darkness.

He heard the incredulous frown in Lumak's voice. 'Can we reach the rendezvous in *two days?*'

Meduson was already stalking from the bridge. 'We must.'

'They have picked up where the clan-fathers left off,' said Meduson, his irritation focused on the middle distance.

The heady atmosphere of the *Iron Heart*'s enginarium lay thick like an oily shroud. Far from peaceful, the great plasma drives thrummed with barely restrained power and gave the air an actinic tang.

Aug could barely feel it, his physical senses inured to such stimulation. His mechanical sensors performed a detailed analysis that was consigned to the subconscious.

'Don't mistake their caution for disapproval,' he said, attempting counsel, his eyes on a diagnostic readout from the main drive array. It glowed in the smoke-dark light, and cast the Iron Father's shadow. Other shadows lurked in the darkness too, toiling menials and servitors without whose blood and sacrifice the *Iron Heart* could not function.

Engine efficiency concerned Meduson, though, not the poor wretches doomed to exist in the ship's deepest holds.

Having altered the balance of various onboard systems, Aug allowed himself a self-indulgent smile as the plasma drives went from sub-optimal to near optimal – an overall performance gain of twenty-three per cent. Not easy, and it had diverted him from other important tasks, but it was done.

'And you now have your two days,' he announced triumphantly.

Meduson nodded, pleased, and clapped Aug on the shoulder.

'Fine work, Jebez. It is one less thing for the other Fraters to bemoan.'

'Indeed,' replied Aug, his tone mockingly sober, 'for it would not do for a Warleader to be tardy.'

Meduson raised an eyebrow as he frowned. 'Don't make me regret asking for your help, Jebez,' he said, but with good humour.

'I am your humble servant,' said Aug, bowing. 'Besides, you saved me the tedium of having to go all the way to the bridge when you accosted me at the

very door.'

Despite himself, Meduson laughed.

'I meant to apologise, Jebez,' he said, 'for my earlier behaviour.'

Aug looked nonplussed, setting down the data-slate. 'To what are you referring, Shadrak?'

'I know you know what I mean.'

Aug gave a slow nod, feigning sudden understanding as if recalling a memory he had since dismissed as unimportant.

Meduson saw through it.

'It wounded you, to be spoken to in such a manner,' he said. 'It was unworthy of me, and you.'

'Your burdens are singular, Shadrak,' said Aug, a small, sad smile on his pallid lips. 'In many ways, I gave them to you. But you are not alone. As Hand Elect, I can be more than just… inspiration.'

Meduson considered that, and considered what else Aug might be saying.

'You think me rash to want to attack the flotilla?'

'It is…' Aug weighed his words, 'bold.'

'And you believe the other Fraters will think so too.'

'I believe they will need convincing.'

Meduson gave a rueful snort. 'And hence my dilemma. They should not have to *be* convinced. As Warleader, my word is an order. If it is to mean anything, then that order must be followed. And not just by those who agree with it, or can see its value.'

'I meant no slight,' said Aug quickly, raising his hand. 'I only think it would be wise to consider the task before you.'

Meduson turned, venting an exasperated breath. He took three paces forwards before turning back. 'We have been here before, Jebez. Ruling by clan council.'

'Ruling?' asked Aug, his frown suggesting a deeper concern at the word.

'Leadership,' Meduson corrected himself, curt, agitated. 'Is my meaning not clear?'

'Ah…' Aug began, 'I am hesitant to reply, for fear of annoying you further. And what clan council? It is gone, slain in a single blow.'

'They gather much like one, and speak as one,' said Meduson, his anger only rising. 'It is a yoke I must break, if we are to move forward.'

'And where would you have us move to, Shadrak?'

'To Terra, to Horus – to something more than this scurrying around in the shadows, this… piracy.'

‘You would challenge the Warmaster? That is more than boldness, Shadrak. It smacks of hubris.’

‘And why not? What is our purpose if it is not to reinforce the Throneworld or kill the one who slew our father? Vengeance or duty, I will take either at this point.’

‘It was Fulgrim who struck the blow,’ said Aug. ‘Would you kill him too?’

‘Yes,’ said Meduson without hesitation.

‘I refuse to believe our only options are to die in glory or live to see obsolescence.’

‘It is not glory I seek, Jebez, it is purpose. Meaning. Our father did not forge us to be scavengers.’

Aug bowed his head a little, an attempt at contrition. ‘I fear I have done the opposite of what I intended, Shadrak. I only meant to say the Iron Fathers will be recalcitrant, and that you should prepare for their resistance.’

Meduson sighed, irritated again that he had allowed the conversation to deteriorate as it had.

I have disaffected him, he thought.

‘I am sorry, Jebez. I am fatigued, that is all.’

‘Perhaps you should see Goran?’

‘I will, I will,’ Meduson replied, swiftly dismissing Aug’s concerns. ‘I had hoped this would be easier.’

‘Without the clan-fathers?’ Aug guessed.

Meduson gave a reluctant nod. ‘I would not have willed it this way, but yes. I harboured hopes we could speak with one voice, act with one fist.’

‘Your voice, your fist.’

Meduson shook his head, resigned. ‘I can see no other way.’

‘Then know I shall help you see it done.’

Aug held out his hand, and after a second’s hesitation, the two locked forearms in the manner of warriors.

‘One voice, one fist,’ said Meduson.

‘As one,’ echoed Aug.

Nerrovorn had died long ago. An early casualty of the war, the world had been bombed almost out of existence, its population reduced to ash and dust. Its peoples had not resisted the Warmaster. They had barely known the galaxy had ripped in two, with the Emperor’s once noble sons fighting and killing each other for the spoils. Horus had made an example of them, as he had many

worlds. Nerrovorn had been amongst the first. A statement of intent. An act of reckless, needless and senseless spite that turned a thriving agri planet into a desiccated hecatomb. No one set foot upon its tainted soil anymore, the Destroyers had seen to that. It possessed nothing of worth, save the grim reminder of the Warmaster's casual wrath. Enough poison freighted its atmosphere to burn ceramite.

Most vessels gave it a wide berth.

A fleet lingered still, clinging to the edges of Nerrovorn's fading gravity well, too large to submit and be dragged to the surface, too weak to drift off into the fathomless void. A graveyard, its ghosts the unquiet spirits of the tens of thousands of crew entombed within its ships.

One of those vessels, a cruiser of considerable size called the *Ardentine*, drifted more or less intact. Several rents in the hull, the subsequent venting of essential air and the fatal failure of life-preserving systems formed the narrative of its demise. Its death had been short, perfunctory and without glory.

Its crew's attempts to cling to life had not succeeded – but then the crew of the *Ardentine*, hardy folk as they once were, had not hailed from Medusa.

The Iron Hands had chosen and secured the ship swiftly, the blighted atmosphere of Nerrovorn the perfect baffle against inquisitive sensoria or long-range augurs. An old flight deck, its vessels futilely spent and having long since crashed earthwards or spiralled voidwards, could easily accommodate a significant gathering of officers and their retinues.

An auditorium of sorts was raised. Light, albeit sparse and flickering with unreliable power, flared anew. It cast long shadows over the serried occupants.

They had come covertly, answering a heavily coded summons. A heightened prey instinct pervaded, and their arrival was staggered. Vulnerability was not a word readily employed in the Medusan tongue, but in recent times its use and meaning had become familiar.

Gunships, landers, lighters, vessels of many designations had ferried their precious cargoes to the *Ardentine*, only to take flight almost as soon as they had arrived – haring back to larger craft lying in wait at the edge of the system, in the radiation pulse of Nerrovorn's dying sun, or in the many volatile nebulas that blinded sensoria both within and without. Scattered across the void. Shattered across their once formidable ranks.

Precautions had become mandatory. The sustained victories of Shadrak Meduson were thought a brief reprieve at best, and at worst, deluding tactics fraught with false security that led only to extinction.

Yet they had gathered according to the Warleader's desire, revenants haunting a ghost ship.

And they glowered like cold and unquiet spirits, jealous of the living and eager to share their pain.

Last to arrive, Meduson knew he had missed something as soon as he alighted from the gunship's ramp with his council and Hand Elect. The glances of the Iron Fathers, however guarded, revealed much.

Several months it had taken to bring this conclave about, several months of clandestine messages, dead drops, false communications and compartmentalised orders. Not just to his own battlegroup, but to *any and all* battlegroups that knew the vox-frequencies and the codes. They might be shattered, these sons of lost and fallen primarchs, disparate in culture and tactical creed, but they shared a common language of sorts. It was one of survival. The necessary rigour of it all fell harshly on the faces of the Iron Fathers, captains, subalterns and other battle-leaders arrayed for Meduson's pleasure.

Fatigue plagued some. For others, weariness had a different root cause. A few were not truly present at all, having chosen to attend this council via hololithic interface. These attendees shimmered incorporeally like true ghosts amongst the assembly.

All appeared expectant.

'My brothers,' Meduson began, hiding his annoyance at the discussions that had clearly taken place in his absence. He noticed that Rawt and the Iron Fathers he had spoken to two days ago aboard the *Iron Heart* had banded together. A silent cohort of disapproval, trying to be their slain clan-fathers. Others – the line officers, captains and lieutenants in the main, and some veteran sergeants – appeared less closed-off but all were waiting for the Warleader to disprove the arguments made against him in his absence.

Meduson did not dispute free speech, far from it, but he wanted a fair hearing. He chose, as with so many supposed impasses, to tackle the matter head-on.

'I apologise for my lateness, and I have no doubt words have been exchanged here without me to hear them.' His voice echoed in the temporarily restored atmosphere of the ship, carrying across the night-dark flight deck with ease.

A partial ring of his accusers, or so it seemed, waited before him. They stood in ranks, their retinues close by and armed. Suspicion would kill Meduson's endeavour as quickly as any enemy.

'And I shall hear them,' he vowed, his gimlet gaze falling upon Rawt in particular. 'But allow me first to say my piece.'

Silence held briefly, somehow undercutting the lonely and ragged banners suspended from the vaulted ceiling. Each portrayed the faded glory of Nerrovorn, the association with the ship's present occupants grimly ironic.

'None shall gainsay you, Warleader,' said Rawt, 'but speak quickly, for every second we labour endangers us further.'

'I recall a time, not so long passed, when the Iron Tenth were not so fearful,' Meduson replied, his teeth already at the throat of his detractors.

'*Tread carefully,*' Aug warned, his voice a whisper across the vox.

Meduson ignored him, his eyes on Rawt, though it was the Iron Father of Atraxii who responded.

'You mistake fear for prudence,' said Norsson. 'Perhaps you do the same with courage and arrogance,' he added coldly. Norsson had come with a cohort of helmed Immortals, whose breacher shields, while at rest, still acted as a bulwark around him.

Allowing himself a rueful smile, Meduson gave a slight shake of the head but refused to be baited.

'Then let us cut to the meat of it, shall we?' he said, his words very deliberately chosen. 'We are winning.'

He looked around, challenging every gaze, be it organic or bionic.

'Allow that to sink in. Victories, brothers. Do you remember the taste of them? I do. And I remember the bitter ash of abject and humiliating defeat. Of the massacre perpetuated against our kith and kin,' he said, his voice rising in volume. 'We were humbled. Broken. There can be no other words to describe it. But we endured. We lived. And then we fought.' He began to pace, looking up and down the gathered warriors, meeting the gaze of each and every one, speaking to them as one legionary to another.

'It served… for a while,' he admitted, nodding as if he were gauging the worth of that service in his memory. 'But the war has *reduced* us. Could any here deny that we are less than we used to be? Not as individuals,' he added, forestalling a vehement denial from a few officers, 'but as a brotherhood – as *three* brotherhoods.' Here he regarded the small cadre of Salamanders and Raven Guard present. They made up less than a tenth of the Iron Hands' fighting strength.

'It offends me,' he said through gritted teeth, and then gestured to the warrior throng. 'It should offend you also. I feel a deep and abiding resentment for our position. I can no longer tolerate it.

'We have raided them. We have murdered them. We have stolen from them.

And still… Here. We. Are.' He gestured expansively with his arms, encompassing the entire gathering.

'Look at us. Look at yourselves,' he said, and some did, for deep down they knew of what Meduson spoke. 'Hiding in the dead wrecks of old ships, too afraid to show our strength for fear of attention. Let them see it. Let them come.'

An old line captain spoke up. His name was Arkul Theld.

'You speak of alloying the Legion, Warleader,' he said, an augmetic in place of his right eye flaring briefly in the half-dark. He gripped a sheathed sword to his breast with a bionic arm. Scars Theld had in abundance, but not so belief. 'I find that rash beyond countenance.'

Meduson sighed, and his head went down for a moment, but he soon rallied and raised his chin defiantly.

'Suffering has ever been the Medusan way. Hells, it has been the meat and drink of every Medusan, Nocturnean and pale-skinned son of Deliverance since the galaxy first drew breath. And we *have* suffered. Perhaps it is beyond our ability to withstand.' He smiled ruefully, and looked Theld in the eye. 'Perhaps. Yes, I want to make us a Legion again. All of us. It is not without risk, and it will not happen immediately. I merely suggest a first, forward step.'

He had their attention now, and so he went on.

'We have fought in the shadows long enough. No more shall we hide like beaten dogs, wary of those who impose themselves as our masters and destroyers. Sons of the Gorgon do not lurk in shadows.'

The declaration provoked heartened affirmations from some. Captains and lieutenants, even some Iron Fathers beat their plastrons with their fists or nodded in vigorous, fervent agreement. Theld gave a near imperceptible nod.

The Raven Guard Dalcoth kept his own counsel, and if he felt any chagrin at the Warleader's words he was wise or disciplined enough not to show it.

The Drake, Nuros, was less circumspect. His teeth clenched at the deliberate exiling of any non-Iron Hands amongst the ranks, biting back his hot tongue.

'What then do you propose, Meduson?' asked a bald-headed Iron Father Meduson did not recognise at first. Despite his ostensible youth, his hooded eyes carried experience. And something darker.

'I suggest you adopt the proper tone, Frater,' uttered Lumak dangerously. 'He is your Warleader.'

The Iron Father sneered. 'Not mine, brother. Though it seems the ragged remnants of the Avernii Clan speak in his stead.'

Now Meduson knew him, or rather the clawed sigil of his clan he wore upon

his armour, and the Warleader put up a hand to ward off Lumak's caustic rejoinder. A side-glance at the captain stayed his blade too.

'Iron Father Autek Mor,' said Meduson, earning Mor a few dark looks from the rest of the gathering. 'I know you by reputation, not by eye, but it is you, isn't it.'

Mor gave a slow, curt nod.

'I had no inkling I was famous.'

'Infamous,' growled one Iron captain, who Mor eyed with murderous contempt.

'He has spilled Tenth Legion blood!' spat another, as the mood of comradeship Meduson had worked hard to foster grew fractious.

'I shall not deny it,' said Mor, and Meduson almost felt the cruelty and disdain radiating from him. 'I have duelled my brothers and killed them in the name of honour. Pride is not a sin only reserved for me.'

Mor had tattooed his flesh, an unusual affectation in the Iron Tenth. Dark angular shapes further deepened his eyes and jagged lines of pseudo-circuitry ran from pursed lips, growing thicker and more uniform at his temples.

An adamantium hood framed his bare scalp and the Cataphractii-pattern war-plate cladding his frame growled restively.

'I also heard he took his warship into the jaws of battle at Isstvan,' said Aug, who stepped forwards alongside his Warleader. 'Trying to reach our stricken father.'

'Aye,' replied Mor, favouring Aug with brief glance. 'A futile gesture that cost Clan Morragul much blood and iron. I have regretted it ever since.'

Angry murmurs rippled through the crowd at this remark, reminding Meduson that Mor's unlooked for appearance must not become a sideshow. Mercifully, no blades had been drawn.

'I asked a question, Warleader,' said Mor. He and his dour retinue stood slightly apart from the rest, like outcasts.

'Let me teach this cur some manners,' muttered Lumak, glaring at the impudent Iron Father in their midst.

Meduson ignored him. Indulging Lumak's pugnacity now would undo the entire endeavour.

'My proposition, Frater, is to take the fight to Horus and the traitors who beheaded our Legion.'

He half turned to Mechosa, who cast a hololith orb onto the deck. It chimed metallically as it struck the floor, adhering magnetically. The sound echoed for a few seconds before the orb began emitting a grainy cone of light.

‘Found in the debris left at Hamart Three,’ Meduson explained.

Not all of the summoned officers, Mor included, had been present at the sacking of the supply camps, but they knew what they saw before them. A screed of data played out from the hololith, reams and reams of tactical information, maps and schematics.

‘Those are ship lanes,’ said Borgus, a lieutenant of Clan Vurgaan, known by the icon of the lightning-struck mountain encircled by a cog emblazoned on his armour. ‘Patrols, supply routes?’

‘An enemy flotilla,’ declared Meduson, as the star charts changed into familiar schematics of warships.

‘A large one,’ offered a captain called Jakkus as each vessel resolved and then faded before the onlookers.

‘And there for the taking,’ said Meduson, vehement and assured.

‘How current is this data-screed?’ asked Borgus.

‘Date stamps indicate it is recent,’ said Meduson.

‘No time to change their plans then,’ said Jakkus.

‘I doubt they even know the information is compromised yet,’ added Meduson. He let his gaze linger on Rawt, Norsson, Arkborne and Kernag, thinking they would finally break their silence.

Meduson was right.

‘An attack on that scale would require a significant muster,’ said Arkborne.

‘And would unnecessarily call attention to our strength and numbers,’ added Norsson. ‘It puts us at great risk. Lest we forget the folly of Oqueth.’

Meduson had to grit his teeth, recalling the calamity inadvertently orchestrated by their now dead clan-fathers.

‘Precisely why change is needed,’ he said.

‘And you are the one to drive this change, are you, Warleader?’ asked Rawt.

‘If not I then whom? We are in desperate need of singular leadership.’

Rawt frowned, his features creasing in confusion. ‘We have it. This council of Iron Fathers shall interpret the will of the Gorgon.’

‘*This is his will!*’ snapped Meduson, not regretting his outburst for a moment. ‘To fight, to kill our enemies. Have you not heeded the reports? Ultramar attacked. Calth fallen, as well as dozens of the Five Hundred Worlds. I have even heard word from our allies that Beta-Garmon, the gateway to the Sol System, has come under heavy assault. Horus and his allies are taking the fight to us. He challenges the Throne of Terra itself. It is not rebellion, Fraters – it is conquest he seeks. For years, we have listened, we have hidden, but now we must act.

Destroying this flotilla weakens the Warmaster's position. Moreover, it tells him the Iron Hands are not a spent force. We must rejoin the war, as a Legion.'

'Ah, so your goal *is* a lofty one,' replied Rawt, and Meduson knew then that this was what had been discussed in his absence, and that he had played into the Fraters' hands. 'An empty throne sits before you, and your ambition is to fill it. Not just *a* Legion…' he said, gesturing slowly to the Warleader. '*Your* Legion. All hail Shadrak Meduson.'

'You speak out of turn, Frater,' warned Aug, before Lumak did.

Meduson waved them both down.

'I would not want such a burden,' he said to Rawt. 'I have never wanted it. But if we do not act, then we diminish. Our ire grows cold and we let the murder of our father remained unchallenged. I would not have it so.'

Support for the Warleader rippled through the ranks. Several outspoken captains, the younger and perhaps more rebellious in demeanour, declared for Meduson at once. A few drew swords in martial affirmation. Autek Mor gave a chuckle of dark amusement, seeming alone in his ability to derive mirth from the solemn occasion.

'We are stronger united,' Meduson told the four Iron Fathers who seemed most opposed to his will. 'Unity is derived from common purpose. These ships,' he gestured to the crackling, grainy hololith, 'this flotilla of our sworn enemy, *is* such a purpose. And we must grasp it.' He held up his bionic hand for emphasis, and made a fist.

A rousing cry went up, phlegmatic and ardent. Boots stomped against the deck, raising a clamour. Blades were shaken, chests beaten with gauntleted fists. The ghost ship resounded to the sound of warriors eager for war.

Meduson's gaze never left the four Iron Fathers. They looked back, as cold and impassive as their black armour. Rawt nodded, so did the others.

As the roar grew louder, Meduson nodded too.

First battle won.

'This attack is just the beginning,' declared Meduson.

Back aboard their gunship and headed for the *Iron Heart*, five legionaries sat on grav-benches as close as conspirators. After the furore aboard the derelict *Ardentine*, plans had been set in place for the disposition of forces. Even though he knew not how many ships and warriors were at his disposal, Meduson had already determined the best course of attack. And he would disseminate that information once he was back at his strategium.

‘I fear you will need more than victory to reforge the Legion, Shadrak,’ said Aug, across from Meduson and facing him. ‘You will need the Iron Fathers. All of them.’

‘They will accede,’ Meduson replied, his mind already on the assault plan.

‘And assuming you are remade as one,’ said Nuros, ‘what then for the outsiders?’

‘Nuros,’ said Meduson, turning to grasp the Salamander’s shoulder and meeting his serious gaze, ‘you and your kin are no outsiders. The Legion will accept you as brothers, as I have.’ He looked across the hold to where a sixth legionary sat alone, half his alabaster face in shadow.

Meduson’s earlier words returned to him. He released Nuros, and did not do Dalcoth further disservice by trying to explain.

The shuddering hold grew quiet, but for the drone of engines and the rattling of metal. A pensive silence filled the ship, uneasy and at odds with past camaraderie.

‘I have already oathed my sword to your cause,’ said Dalcoth, in that harsh, half-spoken way he had. ‘It remains oathed.’ He looked over at Meduson, and his black eyes glittered like pieces of flint.

Mechosa clapped his gauntleted hand on Meduson’s shoulder.

‘Until death, you are the Warleader.’

Lumak nodded.

‘A first step,’ said Aug. ‘One voice, one fist.’

All eyes then went to Nuros, who looked around the others in turn. He laughed, leaning back against the shaking wall of the hold, and folded his massive arms.

‘Are you waiting for me to chime in, brothers?’ he said, eyes narrowed as he wet his lips.

Mechosa sighed at the needless, but amusing theatrics.

‘No need, Warleader,’ said Nuros with a toothy smile. ‘You had me at “kill our enemies”.’

FIVE

Our path, in shadow

It was not true darkness, for even in true darkness there is the suggestion of light. This place had none. In its deepest hollows there lurked an abject *un*-light, not merely its absence but an active negation of it. It gave the dark *substance*, a *presence* that went beyond disquieting and entered a realm of wrongness at odds with any natural law.

The gunship's fierce lumens could not touch the dark, their light simply absorbed. Even the low drone of the turbofans felt subdued as *Vulcanis* moved cautiously through the unnatural night.

Gargo's voice through the vox confirmed it. '*I can see nothing out here.*'

'And yet you sound troubled, brother,' answered Zytos, at ease sat in the hold. 'That's a good sign, isn't it?'

'*No,*' Gargo replied, '*you don't understand…*'

'He means the utter dark,' said Vulkan, lifting up his head from where he had knelt in silent meditation ever since they had breached the eldritch gate. 'This is the shadowed path, my sons. Light has no purchase here.'

'Then how do we see where we are going?' asked Zytos, beginning to understand Gargo's concern.

'I can see well enough,' said Vulkan. 'It's not much farther now.'

'You have been here before, my lord?' asked Abidemi. He had been peering through the viewslits, trying to glimpse something other than the blackness outside, but now turned to Vulkan.

Vulkan nodded, rising to his feet.

'Years ago. I led a party of hunters across the shadowed path. The gate beneath Deathfire that we passed through to reach this place… We found another much

like it. The old tribes of Nocturne had been prey for those we called dusk-wraiths for many years. Each harvest season, when the blood of the world had grown still and the mountains slept, they would come.

'I decided against fear, though the tribal chiefs desperately wanted to hide, to find the deepest caves of Nocturne and wait the raiders out. I knew this was foolish. They had come for flesh, the hardy backs and strong arms of our people. Slaves, my sons. I would not countenance it. I fought the will of the head chieftains, my father N'bel at my side, and gathered the best warriors of the seven tribes.' Vulkan smiled grimly at the memory. 'We ambushed the raiders, at the very place where they breached our world. And we killed them. But the gate remained, a dark and flickering tempest that promised great evil if left alone. I chose to enter it, and to my shame I took our warriors with me.'

Vulkan's face fell, his expression darkening with the tone of his recollections.

'We should have destroyed the gate, but I thought I saw a chance to end the suffering. I was wrong. They died. Every warrior I brought with me, slain. None had good deaths. They fell screaming and shrieking, ripped apart or dragged off into the shadows to a fate I cannot even imagine. Only I escaped, by virtue of the gifts my gene-father had bequeathed to me, though then it was several years before the Emperor came and I knew of the Imperium.

'I closed the gate, tore it down with my bare hands, bloodied and ashamed of my hubris. I knew that to do anything other would be inviting immediate reprisal. The laughter of the dusk-wraiths followed me all the way back to Nocturne.'

Vulkan met his sons' gaze. Anger hardened his jaw, and his eyes burned as hot as a furnace. 'The next harvest, the dusk-wraiths returned. I did not realise then that they could find us almost at will. They had many ways onto our world. We fought them off. I killed a great many, but could not atone for my folly.'

'The eldar,' said Zytos. 'The dusk-wraiths.'

Vulkan nodded.

'I have heard the eldar are a divided race,' offered Abidemi, 'that there are those amongst them who embrace a cruel, malevolent creed.'

'This is their realm,' said Vulkan, and engaged the vox. 'Halt the ship, Igen. We are getting out.'

The engine sound diminished to a dull growl as Gargo set the Thunderhawk down. The descent had been disconcerting, the depth to reach something solid underfoot uncertain and fraught with peril despite the primarch's assurances.

They landed hard, the clawed stanchions that supported the ship barely extending in time.

'Blood of Nocturne!' spat Zytos as the heavy blow resonated throughout the hold.

'*We are down, brothers, father,*' said Gargo from the cockpit.

'An unnecessary announcement,' Zytos replied, exchanging an irritated glance with Abidemi, who had begun attaching his scabbarded sword to his weapons belt.

The ramp lowered a few seconds later, and the dark lingered beyond it.

The Salamanders had donned war-helms, even Vulkan, but despite the retinal enhancement of their armour, the black remained impenetrable.

'On my lead, my sons,' said Vulkan, his voice barely rising above a whisper. 'Stay close, stay quiet.'

They exited the ship, using the runic designators on their helm displays to maintain proximity.

Sound was aberrant here. No echo came from their armoured footfalls against the ramp. To Zytos, even his breath rang flat and hollow inside his helm. But having left the confines of the ship and gazed out upon the hinterlands of this strange, unnerving place, he discerned… shapes.

'I see…'

'This is their land, Barek. The outskirts of a city. *Aelindrach.*'

Zytos turned sharply to his father. 'You know it by name?'

'I…' Vulkan began, looking down as if clutching for a memory, 'I do.' The talisman, the one with seven hammers upon its face, was in the primarch's hand.

Zytos had not paid much attention to the talisman at first, deeming it just another part of the primarch's armour, but now he did, his eye was drawn to it. Its form was as absorbing as the dark.

'It will find a path,' said Vulkan, as if he knew what Zytos was looking at, without having seen him do it.

He raised his eyes and the talisman, the hammers… *turned.*

'A compass then?' asked Zytos, wondering at the artefact's purpose.

'One that can navigate this eldritch night,' said Abidemi, drawing his sword with a flat scrape of monomolecular steel.

Vulkan regarded the talisman of seven hammers. 'Igen,' he said through his vox, 'follow us. Stay close.'

As Vulkan led on, Zytos and Abidemi in his wake, the gunship rose up on seemingly muted engines. Air blew out from its whirling turbofans, but it was

cold and frost soon crusted the armour of the three in front.

'Pay it no heed,' Vulkan told them.

Zytos shook his arms to shatter the worst of the ice, and heard mocking laughter as it came apart. He stopped to look around, finding only darkness and the suggestion of statues or towers that might have been kilometres away or only a few metres. Distance had become hard to gauge.

Even their armour appeared bleached of vigour, vivid greens and vibrant reds becoming pale and insipid.

'Keep moving,' Vulkan told him. 'Do not slow down for anything. We are being watched.'

Zytos unslung his bolter. It had a dragon-mouth at the end of the barrel and finely wrought gilt chasing around the grip. He nodded to Abidemi to do the same, and the two warriors began searching the shadows for threats.

None came.

The darkness began to abate and in its place arose a noisome marshland of talon-like reeds and shallow, brackish pools. Towards the black horizon, Zytos thought he made out a long row of signs, their posts driven deep into the dark loamy soil underfoot. It was only as he narrowed his eyes that he realised the signs were crucifixions, their victims still hanging in place.

He felt a hand upon his shoulder, but heard Abidemi's steady breathing.

'Nothing but pain out there, brother.'

Zytos nodded, his gaze lingering for a moment before he turned away.

The marsh appeared endless, with little to distinguish it. Hillocks arose in places, surrounded by cold, still water as black and thick as oil. Hunched figures crowded on some, lurkers that had the appearance of men, only rangy and emaciated, their skin grey and gelid-looking. Without eyes, they sniffed ceaselessly, scent pits flaring at the collision of strange odours presented by the Drakes.

One arched back its head to let out an inhuman howl that spoke of thwarted hunger. Then, as a pack, they scurried agilely away.

'Do not concern yourself with them,' said Vulkan. 'They are bone-pickers, carrion-eaters – too craven and not nearly starved enough to bother us.'

Zytos loosened his grip on the bolter, but only marginally.

A little way ahead, the marshland grew firmer underfoot and the tangled bough of a tree emerged out of the shadows. It loomed even above the primarch. Pale and thorny vines choked the scaly bark of its wizened trunk. A tarry sap dripped from where the tree's flesh had split, pooling at roots that drank the filth eagerly,

as though they were the mouths of suckling babes.

'Is it a sign of some kind?' ventured Abidemi, taking care to give the tree a wide berth.

'We called it the "wounded tree",' said Vulkan. 'It was to be our marker, so we would not get lost. It has grown since I last saw it.' He looked closer. 'Still here… I don't believe it.' Old sigils had been carved into the trunk. Vulkan traced each one with his outstretched finger, close enough to the tree that the edges of his boots touched the tarry sap and he stood entirely in the shadow of its wretched bough. 'Tribal symbols,' he whispered, 'of the warriors who followed me here.'

Zytos turned his head, angling his neck up and inhaling loudly through his helm's rebreather.

'Do you smell that?' he asked, scowling.

A stagnant odour had suddenly drifted across the grey wilderness. It reeked of decay, of old and dead places. Fog came with it, creeping low and steady across the ground. It spread eagerly across a rugged hinterland of bleak, undulating hills patched with long, dark grass and the rough, spiny gorse that had supplanted the foetid marsh. Ice freckled the grass, shattering like glass underfoot.

The hunched and sightless lurkers returned, but kept their distance. As Zytos watched, he realised they were fleeing from the fog.

His eye was drawn to a glittering tract of water, an oily lagoon he had not noticed before. Mist bled off its surface like fever sweat, congealing into the bland, colourless fog that had terrified the lurkers. It reached across a range of low hills, climbing rather than pooling in the shallow valleys, its edge a tendril-lined fringe that took on the appearance of fingers, grasping, hungry…

The lurkers had scattered, lost to burrows and hollows.

At the edge of the lagoon – or was it at its heart, standing upon the water? – an entirely different figure could be seen. Its precise appearance was difficult to discern. It shimmered as if both solid and incorporeal at the same time. Tall, dishevelled, with ragged white hair hanging down across its face, it pointed a large, curved blade at the interlopers. Then it was gone. Not fled, just vanished like a shadow in the sudden absence of light.

Zytos looked again to the fog.

New shadows coalesced in that bleached miasma, humanoid, armed with hooks and blades, the twin of the figure on the water.

Zytos let out a warning shout, but when he blinked the shadows had gone.

By the time Abidemi reached him, Zytos was already lowering his bolter.

‘Nothing…’ he hissed, scouring the fog. He suddenly wished he had Gargo’s auspex, but that was with their pilot in the gunship’s cockpit. In the few seconds that had passed, the strange fog had crept closer.

‘Something is moving in it,’ said Abidemi, taking aim.

Zytos saw it too, a figure crawling on hand and foot, slithering upon its belly, a blade shimmering between clenched teeth. Its eyes flashed once, as green as dirty jade, before it disappeared.

The fog crept closer still.

‘There!’ shouted Abidemi, rushing to the left as he took a kneeling stance and sighted down his weapon.

Another ophidian figure skittered just below the mist, its face obscured by long, lank hair.

‘I have it,’ declared Abidemi triumphantly, but the figure vanished and another appeared in its stead, only closer.

Zytos had this one in his crosshairs, having taken up position on Abidemi’s unguarded flank. Together, they formed a drake-scaled island about to be surrounded by a vaporous sea.

A muffled shot rang out as Zytos discharged his weapon. He waited for the killing detonation of his bolter shell, but instead he heard and saw nothing.

‘Not possible,’ he murmured. ‘It was in my sights.’

‘Another!’ said Abidemi, and unleashed a burst. Again, the expected impacts never came, somehow absorbed by the fog. He stood, so did Zytos, as a host of the strange figures appeared at once. The fog had begun to foul the Salamanders’ auto-senses, and accurate targeting became almost impossible. Inaccurate would have to serve instead.

Muzzle flare erupted from their bolters, briefly adding light to the dark, but the weapons’ once thunderous reports were swallowed almost entirely. Sustained salvoes scythed into the fog, kicking up earth and sending watery plumes skywards.

Zytos held out a hand gesturing for them to cease. He read the data-screed across his retinal lens in disbelief.

‘No casualties…’

‘Impossible,’ hissed Abidemi, replacing a spent clip with swift and practised ease. He resumed firing. So did Zytos.

The fog had all but reached them, its fingers stretching impossibly, the tips lengthening and tapering to fine points like blades…

A resounding hammer blow struck the earth, staggering the Drakes, and the fog

recoiled. It retreated back into the shadows, taking the grim creatures with it.

Vulkan stood in the legionaries' midst, the pommel of his hammer stamped hard into ground cracked by brutal impact.

'Come, my sons,' he said, his hard eyes burning, regarding the shrinking fog. 'They won't be gone long.'

A short time later, the Drakes passed into a benighted grove whose trees defined a wandering path, their branches reaching above, their roots tangling below.

Mist lingered here too, but it was thinner than that which had formed across the water. It lurked around the yawning boles of trees or gathered where black and spiny leaves grew thickly. But it did not intrude.

'They are the denizens you fought, aren't they?' said Zytos, his voice a conspiratorial whisper. 'The ones who killed your kin.'

Vulkan nodded.

The three stayed close to each other, but Gargo in the gunship had to fly above the grove or risk becoming ensnared in the eager, grasping limbs of its trees. He had seen and heard nothing during the incident with the fog, claiming to have only witnessed the others standing by the wounded tree and no more than that. Vulkan had chosen not to refute what Gargo believed, rebuffing his concerns with a father's reassurance and seniority.

'What are they?' asked Abidemi.

'Shadows, of a kind,' uttered Vulkan, but did not elaborate. He held on to his hammer with two hands and kept the haft close to his chest.

Both Zytos and Abidemi had unsheathed hand-to-hand weapons too, deeming bolters too unreliable in this night realm.

'Like none I have ever seen,' breathed Abidemi, keenly watching the darkness, *Draukoros* held out in front of him like a flaming torch.

'We didn't *see* them, brother,' said Zytos, thunder hammer grasped high up the haft. 'Can they be killed?'

'I'm not sure if they are entirely alive,' admitted Vulkan. 'But yes, they can be vanquished.' He said it with the authority of one with first-hand experience.

'How, if our bolters are so ineffective?'

'We have to wait,' answered the primarch.

'Wait for what?'

'For them to get close.'

'As strategy goes…' Zytos began.

'It is a hazardous one,' Vulkan agreed.

As they passed through the grove, Abidemi reached out but stopped short of touching the spiny leaves. They looked like knives, only black and perversely veined. Something squirmed in the tree trunks, writhing, in pain.

'I do not know what I expected of this place, but it was not this. Nature itself has been subverted, corrupted. And I suspect these are not even trees.'

Vulkan's silence spoke for him.

After a few moments, Zytos wanted answers.

'This shadowed path… What is it, father?'

'You are standing on it.'

'No, what *is* it? I looked back, through the grove, down the path and I saw nothing of whence we came. It wasn't shadow, or fog. It had gone. And I believe if I tried to return to it, to retrace my steps, I would emerge somewhere else entirely.'

Vulkan stopped, letting the talisman of seven hammers gently fall against his breastplate.

'It is a realm between realms, a place known to few mortals. I took us through the gate beneath Deathfire because I knew it would bring us here to Aelindrach. We roam its edges, its untamed wilderness. To descend into it proper would be unwise, even for me. But the city, it *knows*…' Vulkan gestured to a ragged, avian creature perched on a high branch. Its slick feathers shimmered with a wet sheen that reminded Zytos of blood. The creature gave off a caw of displeasure that sounded very much like a female voice, before taking flight on emaciated wings.

'It sees us,' Vulkan continued, 'and is trying to ensnare us even now. The darkness, the fog, this grove of wretched trees that are not trees – Aelindrach is moving against us.'

'Its denizens?' asked Abidemi, still watching the wretched bird depart.

'Yes, but also the city itself. Its borders are shifting, folding, like a slow-waking predator that realises prey has stumbled into its lair.'

As Zytos looked into the darkness and the silhouettes of the trees, he realised they were moving, subtly like shadows stretched against the light, ever reaching.

'We must not linger,' said Vulkan.

They moved on, travelling in wary silence until the grove thinned and yielded to dark moorland studded with black menhirs. A light shone here but not from any sun. A great orb loomed above, appearing only half-real, somehow both present and absent at the same time.

Its bleak light fell on a scorched black knoll, out of which sprouted a tower.

Beyond the tower lurked the distant lights of a city, creeping closer.

‘This is the threshold,’ said Vulkan, first eyeing the tower and then glancing up to the gunship. ‘Igen,’ he said across the vox, ‘bring the ship in low. Keep the engines quiet.’ He looked back to the winding city in the far but narrowing distance. Every blink seemed to bring it closer. ‘Eyes lurk everywhere.’

‘I see no birds, no fog…’ said Zytos.

Vulkan met his gaze. ‘They *follow* us, Barek. They have followed us ever since we passed beyond the wounded tree. And the closer we get and the longer we stay here, the more they will see.’ He gestured towards the tower. ‘Our path lies within. Its denizens are waiting. They have let us come this far, but now they will have to act.’

‘Let us, father?’ Zytos asked, incredulous.

Vulkan dismissed his doubt with a glance. ‘Earlier was just gauging our strength. Rest assured, they will come, to try to keep us from the tower.’

‘What awaits in there, father?’ asked Abidemi.

‘A gate, Atok. One we must breach.’

‘Well guarded, I assume,’ said Zytos, hefting his hammer.

‘I have no doubt,’ said Vulkan, and he led them on.

The menhirs sunk into the earth sang as Vulkan forged a certain path through the dark moor, warning his sons not to touch the stones or approach too closely. Depending on the angle they were viewed from, the stones appeared to shimmer, translucent, iridescent. At other times they disappeared entirely only to then manifest within touching distance. Faces became apparent, lurking within their apparently fathomless depths. And then they weren’t singing any more, but screaming. The keening wail of these damned souls grew deafening until at last the Drakes had passed through and silence and sanity returned.

The tower loomed then, large and imposing before them, a spear of dark crystal driven deep into the earth. It jutted upwards, a spiked crown around its neck, just beneath its bladed tip. No obvious way in presented itself. Zytos walked the tower’s entire circumference but found no door or window, no cleft or archway of any kind. Abidemi too found no path inwards. Nor did Vulkan, who had returned to scrutinising his talisman again.

Zytos briefly glanced at the sky, and then the grim moorland, but detected no threat. Gargo roamed the air, staying close. Vulkan had forbidden him from unleashing the gunship’s weapons on the tower, deeming it pointless and only likely to attract further unwanted attention. Now he was here, at the end of the shadowed road, Zytos had become aware of the slow awakening the primarch had mentioned. Something slumbered in this ancient hollow. It grew cognisant of

their presence. Zytos did not fear it. He feared nothing and would fight to the death by his resurrected father's side, but reckless courage would not see them through the shadowed road. Caution would.

'Abidemi,' he voxed, hoping two pairs of eyes would be better than one as he returned to the tower. What he saw in the dark glass made him stop short.

A doppelganger regarded him, unnoticed by Zytos before. It mimicked him at first, but as he looked closer he realised its movements were slightly out of synch, until at last it did not move at all but merely stared.

'What is this?' he whispered, and the doppelganger whispered back.

What is this?

Rime began to creep across the glass.

Zytos raised his thunder hammer, sending a whip crack of power across its head.

'Don't mock me, shade. Show yourself!'

The doppelganger gave a short, gracious bow and then… *changed*.

I will show you. I will show you everything.

It stretched, its proportions grotesque and somehow altered, so it was Zytos and yet not. Gnarled horns burrowed through its battered helm, flaking away like spent skin. Its eyes burned with a greasy hellfire that caked the edges of his retinal lenses with grimy soot. Its mantle, no longer made of drakescale, glistened like fever-drenched flesh. A horrifying simulacrum stood before him in the glass, framed by the creeping cancer of the frost.

Zytos tried to recoil but could not. His hammer fell loose by his side, useless in the thrall of the dark glass holding him against his will, seizing every limb in ice.

He reached out determined to shatter the glass and undo whatever enthralment had been inflicted on him, when he saw a gauntlet grown ugly with talons, the metal black and corrupted.

'It cannot be…' he gasped, looking down and seeing the reality of his horrific transformation, unable to prevent it. 'It cannot be!'

He roared, defiant, and a serpentine tongue slipped from the mouth of his war-helm to taste the air.

'It cannot–'

'Barek!'

Zytos felt himself yanked hard away from the tower. As he sprawled onto his back, half-mad with the visions, a hammer blow cracked the glass and banished the grim reflection.

A firm hand gripped Zytos around the forearm, prodigious strength hauling him

to his feet.

'Barek,' urged Vulkan, 'draw your weapon. They are here.'

The frost swathed the dark moor, cracking across the menhirs and shawling the rough glass like a cloak.

It was their sign, he realised. The shadows in the fog.

Groggy, Zytos found the haft of his thunder hammer and felt sense return. He was as he had always been, a Salamander. Vulkan had broken the grim fiction that assailed him.

Other images filled the glass now, not reflections but captured shadows, dividing along every fracture caused by Vulkan's blow, lethal, corporeal and manifold.

Overhead, the fell birds returned, cawing an announcement.

Images filled Zytos' mind.

Long, lank hair the colour of winter flows on an unfelt breeze…

Skin black as oil, rune etched in smoking viridian, shimmers…

A hooked blade, a curved sickle, a serrated sword, their edges catch the light…

Dirty skirts of ragged brown leather, tied with braided sinew draped languidly as…

…a hand engulfed in green fire reached out through the glass.

A shadow-thing sprang at Vulkan, who struck as it leapt for him, obliterating bone that was not bone, sundering flesh that dispersed into tatters of night. It came from the dark, its presence in the glass another lie.

Vulkan felled another as it bled from the shadows, his unyielding hammer reducing it to ragged strips of darkness that drifted in the wake of his swing like tossed feathers.

A third appeared in the wake of the second, and Vulkan crushed it, the body dispersing into a fine black powder before dissipating on the breeze.

'Barek!' shouted Vulkan. The enemy ranks swelled. A ring of grinning shadows appeared, their eyes gleaming and malevolent, their hooked and sickle blades chiming.

Zytos engaged. His first swing cut air as he misjudged the blow. A second fared no better, but earned mocking laughter. A blade struck into his side, biting, painful, and a rash of warning icons flared in his retinal feed. Zytos ignored them.

He deflected a sickle aimed at his neck. It rang like a bell, the shadows cackling as they surrounded him, their faces twisting and reshaping. The blade had lodged fast, its wielder sawing eagerly.

A thunder hammer cleaved air, and failed to land. Two slivers of jade narrowed, amused at an enemy thwarted.

Zytos roared, venting his anger.

The sickle returned, aimed high and glinting dully. A hammer's haft repelled it, but missed the chain. His forearm ensnared with an adder's swiftness, hauled off balance, Zytos stumbled.

Yanked clear, the blade that had struck him left a gouge. Another blade hooked into the joint between greave and shoulder. Blood spouted from the wound, forcing a muffled cry from Zytos.

Shadows rippled, bolder, hungry, finding nourishment. Faces shimmered, as cold malevolence turned to hunger. Maws opened, over-wide, fringed with needle teeth.

'They feed on pain,' said Vulkan, smearing a shadow-thing into the tower.

Zytos snarled, his pride hurting more than his flesh.

'Then feast on this!'

The hammer swung side to side, a brutal pendulum at arm's length. Two shadows died, one shattering as if had been blown from glass, while the other bled away like dispersing ink. No two deaths, if death was what truly had claimed them, were the same.

A lamprey mouth latched on to his shoulder, biting deep. Zytos gave a strangled cry of pain then crushed the head and the shadow winked out, a light extinguished.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Abidemi cut one into smoke. His brother cleaved a savage circle with *Draukoros*, slicing off strips that drifted away like thin parchment, Numeon's former sword reaping a tally.

'Stand with me, brother,' Zytos called to him, and they fought back-to-back.

Vulkan fought alone, and gave no quarter.

Beset by these wraiths, he took a measure that would have broken any corporeal foe, but the shadows were relentless.

'Draaksward,' he cried, 'to my side!'

Abidemi led a brief charge across the moorland and soon all three Drakes were united.

The gunship circled above, harassed by flocks of dark birds, the emaciated ravens of the grove having reached them at last and reacted to the aerial threat. Gargo gunned them down with prow-mounted heavy bolters, and the air filled with rangy feathers and bloody sinew.

He peeled off left, more ravens giving chase, unperturbed at their fellows'

destruction, and became a distant shape against the horizon.

Before the tower, the wraiths attacked from every cleft, every scrap of darkness. The moors thronged with them, sibilant, half-seen, perfidious.

Zytos and Abidemi held them back, cutting several down, but the tide kept rising.

Vulkan hurled back a swathe of shadows and let the darkness take them, earning a few seconds' respite.

'Keep them back,' he told his sons. 'This only ends if we breach the tower.'

'Breach it how, father?'

'It is protected by a shadow field, Barek.'

'A barrier?' asked Abidemi, fending off two cuts with a single crossways slash of his sword. Both warriors looked battered, their armour split in over a dozen places. Blood dripped down Abidemi's right gauntlet and ice numbed Zytos' left leg, turning black around the greave.

'A powerful one,' replied Vulkan, 'but it will yield to me.'

The tower *was* the shadow field, realised Zytos. And he heard the blow against it like struck thunder…

But it did not yield.

Vulkan swung again, two-handed, putting all of his strength into the blow. The tower cracked. Fissures ran across the glass like ugly veins, but as they did, the older cracks resealed. Every fresh attack undid the damage of the last.

Determined to breach the tower, Vulkan unleashed a hail of blows but did no better than before.

He looked at the talisman of seven hammers, but it didn't move. Its purpose remained mysterious. As his fingers touched the fulgurite, he felt the tremble of god-power within but knew this was not the way either. How he knew these things, how he had acquired these instincts, Vulkan could not articulate, but he had returned from the dead in possession of hitherto unknown knowledge. Matters were becoming clearer, but gaps in his understanding yet remained.

Rather than trying to grasp something beyond his reach, Vulkan focused instead on what he did know.

He had come here before, long ago. His warriors had reached the tower. It was a gateway, he knew this, but it was more than that. It led to another place first, to the hunter of heads and a dark refuge. A lair. A thwarted predator denied his due.

Lowering the hammer, Vulkan leaned close to the glass, so close his hot breath fogged against a frosty pane

‘I’m here, Kheradruakh,’ he whispered.

The hail of his father’s blows still rang in his ears, and Zytos glanced over his shoulder in the hope of seeing the tower broken. Instead he saw ice riming empty footprints and no sign of Vulkan.

SIX

An old debt, remembered

The chill of the dark moor abated, swallowed by a subterranean swelter. It smelled of damp and animal sweat, a fever heat. Down here, wherever *here* was, the air grew thick with a fug of cloyingly fecund earth. Spores hung in unseen updraughts, clinging like dust motes. A greasy film settled on Vulkan's war-plate, reaching into joints, trying to befoul them.

Standing perfectly still, the primarch got his bearings.

The tower had gone, and a burrow had replaced it. A large earthy cavern surrounded him, low, close, choking. Roots protruded from the cavern walls, osseous and calcified. Not the natural reaching tendrils of trees. Skulls protruded too, plugged into the mud like bony mushrooms, pale sockets staring, rictus grins on every fleshless face.

Vulkan recognised them. How could he not?

Krael of Themis, Hrun'din of Hesiod, Ildra of Aethonion brought low to Ignea, the labyrinth of the Nocturnean underworld.

And they were not alone. Every warrior who had come on Vulkan's ill-fated quest resided here, beheaded and trapped in the earth. Their names echoed in the earth hall, briefly alarming the primarch. Vulkan had not realised he had spoken them aloud.

'This is not Ignea,' he said boldly, a challenge issued to the heady darkness in front of him. He hefted his hammer.

'And this is not Krael…' He smashed the skull apart. The others lasted a few seconds longer, until Vulkan had turned every skull into bone fragments.

'Are you here, shade stalker?' shouted Vulkan. 'I have returned.'

The end of the chamber led away into darkness, still and silent but for the

faintest sound of metal scraping against bone. Vulkan knew it well. The hunter of heads was hard at work.

Vulkan lowered *Urdrakule* and followed the sound.

Darkness fell about him like a cloak, neither comforting nor malevolent. It soon yielded to an eerie hemispherical sanctum, a cavern lined with rank upon rank of flensed skulls, their empty eye sockets pointed inwards towards their skulking slayer.

He squatted atop a mound of heads, some bare to the bone and stained in blood, others with flesh still attached. Their keeper busied himself, rooting amongst his trophies and dextrously skinning them with an immense curved blade. His hair was long, dark and lank with two bones impaled crossways through a ragged topknot.

Tattered scraps of cloth clung to his frame and wizened limbs, the latter rangy but taut with unnatural strength. Runes marked his skin, glowing dully like sickly emerald.

As Vulkan stepped beyond the threshold, Kheradruakh glanced up from his labours, a second pair of arms revealed as his body slowly unfurled.

His eyes were hollow pits of fathomless black, promising an eternity of agony.

The wretched creature smiled, a repugnant expression, then pointed with a long-taloned finger to a gap in his legion of skulls.

He clutched a head still, its pallid flesh clinging to the bone, but swiftly rolled it between his four upper limbs like a spider fashioning silk. Rather than spinning, however, his intent was quite the opposite. In a few short moments, a gleaming skull sat in Kheradruakh's hands.

'A place for me, shade?' said Vulkan calmly. 'I am honoured, but shall have to decline. Instead, I will need passage through the gate. I know it is here. You've hidden it behind this shadow. You will reveal it now.'

A harsh choking sound haunted the chamber. It took Vulkan a moment to realise it was laughter.

All the while, Kheradruakh moved neither his lips nor his limbs, but the air around him crackled… and suddenly he was gone.

Vulkan moved fast, raising *Urdrakule* as a long curved blade raked across its haft. He barely saw the shade stalker – Kheradruakh had vanished almost as he appeared.

Vulkan turned and intercepted a beheading blow that fell so hard his ears rang. Again, Kheradruakh vanished.

A third attack jarred the hammer haft once more. A fourth grazed Vulkan's arm

as he raised it in defence. Every blow was a killing strike, aimed at the neck. Kheradruakh did not wound his prey, he slew them outright. A hunter of heads. A decapitator of rare and gruesome talent.

And he did not yield to frustration. Patiently, relentlessly, he wore at the primarch, vanishing and reappearing, flitting from shadow to shadow. From above, from below, no direction of attack was barred to him. Slowly, Vulkan began to tire. Fatigue gnawed at him but whatever evil lurked in this place was draining him too.

Souls, he realised. The eyeless sockets of the staring skulls had some anima left. Every one had turned to regard him. Ice coated the primarch's armour, reaching beyond ceramite and adamantium.

The laughter returned, dripping with ancient malice. Kheradruakh sensed the end.

'*None defy me,*' he said, a half-heard echo. '*You could not escape my blade forever…*'

'You should know, shade stalker,' Vulkan said, slightly breathless, 'that I cannot die. Not by your hand.'

He had no idea if that was true anymore, but it felt reassuringly bold.

Vulkan remembered. He remembered the hunters following him into the lair. He remembered an arachnid thing scuttling across the ceiling on six rangy limbs. He remembered Krael's head falling from his shoulders, the tribesman's face cold and dumbstruck.

Eight had made it this far. Many more had entered the rift. None of them got any further. Every warrior of Nocturne died, beheaded.

Belgerad had been the last. He had wrapped a cloth around his hunter's spear and doused it with drakespit. The volatile substance gave off a noisome reek that had stung the nostrils. The blade had severed Belgerad's neck just as he lit the rag and fire and light flared ferociously.

'Belgerad…' uttered Vulkan, provoking a moment's hesitation from Kheradruakh.

Does he remember that name? wondered Vulkan. *The one who hurt him.*

The primarch's fingers traced the ancient sigils wrought into the haft of the hammer. He shut his eyes as he found the one engraved into the icon of a blazing sun, his last glimpse that of a spider descending. 'You never did like the light.'

The blind flare fashioned into *Urdrakule*'s head exploded into searing magnesium brightness.

Kheradruakh shrieked in agony. The scent of withered old flesh burned on the

foetid air. Eyes still closed, Vulkan swung with *Urdrakule* and heard the crunch of bone. Daring to look, half-blind, he saw the hunter of heads scurrying back into shadow, two of his limbs hanging loose by his sides and leaving a trail of dark blood in his wake.

Stung, Kheradruakh folded his other limbs protectively against his body.

As the light died, the chamber faded with it. First it thinned to gossamer, then a dry mist. The skulls disappeared. The chamber disappeared. Kheradruakh lingered longest, the hollows of his eyes pitiless and already yearning for revenge.

And then he was gone, and only a black cube remained. It levitated above the ground, slowly turning in the air, sparks of dark lightning cascading off its iridescent surface.

The shadow field, or at least its cause.

Vulkan destroyed it.

Gargo circled the gunship around again, heavy bolters roaring a brutal chorus as they tore up the avian flocks trying to bring him down. He had come for the others almost as soon as Vulkan had vanished, the enemy having retreated enough for him to set the gunship down.

An engine stuttered, spitting blood and greasy feathers across the side of the smeared viewing pane. Gargo altered his angle of approach as the suicidal birds arrowed for the turbofans. Claw marks raked against cockpit glass, obscuring his view but not penetrating. Dark bodies bounced across the prow and hull, their tiny bones breaking on impact.

As he pulled the gunship into a sharp banking manoeuvre, he felt Zytos' gauntleted hand on his shoulder.

'There,' Zytos said, and pointed through the forward viewing pane.

A spear of white soared up into the sky, brighter than daylight.

Gargo engaged the flare shields, tinting the armourglass.

The tower collapsed, shattering like fluted glass exposed to the perfect resonance. It fell straight down, the individual shards like drops of rain suspended in time then abruptly released before dissipating into nothing.

A silhouette stood in the light, one arm aloft, a hammer clutched in his hand.

'Vulkan…'

Beaten but unbowed. The primarch's armour had been split in a dozen places. Wearied, he arched his neck to find the descending gunship as it came for him.

A tempest grew as the light finally died, small at first and snapping with

eldritch energies, but unravelling. A cold wind blew against Vulkan's back, encrusting his shoulder guards with hoar frost and kicking up his drakescale cloak like a banner.

Zytos voxed Abidemi in the hold.

'Brother, we have him.'

The ramp lowered as the gunship came in hard, fighting the wind. Ice began to obscure the viewing pane.

'Make it fast,' Gargo warned, manoeuvring the vessel into an about-turn as Vulkan staggered across the moor. Flicking a pair of switches on the control panel, he auto-reloaded the forward heavy bolters.

The shadows, having fled the moment the primarch had entered the tower, returned. As the ramp slammed down, Zytos had already gone back into the hold. A sustained bolter salvo roared from within, chopping either side of Vulkan as he clambered aboard. The heavy bolters attached to the cockpit roared too.

The shadows weaved, spectral, serpentine, but exercised much less caution in their eagerness to kill the wounded primarch. Bolt-rounds tore them apart, smoke and ink and shattering glass erupting with every detonation.

'We have him!' Zytos bellowed, firing one-handed, careless of his inaccuracy and hammering the back of the side of the hold with a clenched fist.

Sunk to one knee, also shooting from the hip and with one hand, Abidemi reached for Vulkan's arm and helped him inside even as Gargo fed all power to the engines.

They shot straight up, a desperate, dizzying acceleration that shook the hull. Grappling with the sheer, sudden ascent, Gargo took the ship around in a wide arc as the tempest hammered and pulled.

'Into the tempest!' shouted Vulkan, nodding to Abidemi. The ramp had barely closed behind him, sealing out the worst of the storm.

The hull trembled, tortured metal screeching in protest. A bolt came loose. A piece of ablative ceramite stripped away, caught by the wind. More ferocious than the eldritch gate below Deathfire, this one threatened to rip them in two. A lightning strike sheared the barrel of the dorsal-mounted battle cannon in half. A second almost transfixed the right wing.

'Now, Igen!' roared the primarch. 'Now, or this has been for nothing!'

From the city, shapes were stirring, moving rapidly, visible through the fouled viewing pane. Not shadows, but skimmers, entire flocks of barbed skiff-like vessels thronged with the silhouettes of warriors.

Ahead, the storm grew fiercer, jagged lightning coursing erratically from its

eye.

‘Merciful Deathfire…’ breathed Gargo, and flew straight for it.

SEVEN

Either, Or

Smoke trailed the battlefield, leaning against the wind, heady with the scent of death. The outpost had been well sacked. A broken crate crunched underfoot and the warrior looked down to investigate. Bolt clips, sickle magazines – an entire case of them, gone.

'Not quite,' he muttered, stooping to retrieve an errant shell missed in the thief's apparent hurry. 'You forgot this one.' Rising, he tucked it into a belt pouch and carried on.

'Tell me again, Kysen,' said the warrior.

'Once was not enough?' asked Kysen Scybale, but took the data-slate from his belt.

'Humour me,' said the warrior, having stopped before the yawning gates of the Primus camp.

'Very well.'

They stepped through together, an honour guard behind them, silent but for their growling war-plate.

The breach still burned, though the flames lapped gently rather than devoured now.

'Looks like a blasting charge,' said the warrior, running a gauntleted hand against the toothy hole in the camp's overwhelmed defences. 'Several charges,' he mused, allowing a humourless smile.

Scybale, a sergeant armoured in grimy sea-green, began.

'Senthis, a refuelling station, lightly defended. Karobben Six, remote deep void augur, minimal Legiones Astartes presence. Vartak, shell manufactory, protected by thralled Mechanicum helots. The Ardunaak supply line, the Veniskae supply

line. Augment and Umulent asteroid-depots…' He paused to look up from the slate. The data-screed still had many more screens to spool through. 'Need I go on?'

'Yes, Kysen,' said the warrior. 'Continue.'

He did, and the relentless report of guerrilla engagements, sabotage missions, infiltrations, feints, hit-and-run attacks and carefully planned ambuscades became a background drone as the small party toured the carnage.

The entire camp – almost the entire camp, the warrior reminded himself – had been stripped of weapons, ammunition and war materiel. Even most of the tanks had been taken. And what they could not carry, the thieves had spiked. Corpses of vehicles, reduced to empty black shells, still drooled smoke in some quarters.

Bodies remained too but, the warrior noted, remained unmarked by anything other than their death wounds. Mutilation as an act of revenge or petty spite, or just the cathartic release of anger, had become commonplace.

So, he still has honour then.

No survivors though.

He is ruthless too.

The thought provoked another smile on a face ill-suited to mirth, a pugilist's face, a ganger's face, hair shorn down to the scalp.

'…and Hamart Three,' Scybale concluded, angry breaths sawing through his gritted teeth. 'Am I to recite the full and complete works of the dramaturges of Old Albia next? Marlowe or Shakespire?'

The warrior laughed, a deep throaty reverberation thick with Cthonian menace. It was a gutter tongue in many ways, bred to be hard, evolved to be forbidding.

'The losses,' replied the warrior when he had done with Scybale's questionable wit, 'give me those next.'

Another data-screed, the same slate, and Scybale began a second recitation as the war party slowly made its way to the core of Primus camp.

The tally of men and materiel continued as they entered a municipal building, partially fortified, its barricades scattered and broken with the force of an overwhelming insertion.

The warrior looked up at the shattered ceiling, the dull light bleeding in from the outside together with the faintest stirrings of rain.

By the time they reached the body of Karbron Velx, it was pouring. It tinkled against metal armour plate, almost tuneful, utterly unremitting. Some of the dirt fallen on the warrior's armour had washed clean, revealing kill-markings. Sea-green paint emerged, worn down to gunmetal-grey in places. Rivulets ran down

a stylised eye engraved into the breastplate. The rain couldn't do much about the craters and gouges in both the warrior's greaves and pauldrons though.

'Seems they got to Velx,' he said idly.

He almost heard the raised eyebrow in Scybale's reply. 'What makes you say that?'

The warrior turned to regard him. 'Flippant today, aren't you, Kysen? Why do they always cut off our heads, brother? I wonder if it's some petty act of retribution?'

'I'm wondering why we are here, captain,' answered Scybale.

'Ah, I see,' said the warrior, their captain, and gestured to one of his hulking honour guard, a company champion who had yet to loosen his grip on a deadly mortuary sword. 'Cyon… if you wouldn't mind.'

The warrior glanced at a vault sunk into the floor of the half-destroyed building.

Cyon Azedine nodded curtly, and swept the sword from its sheath to split the vault lid in two.

'Empty, captain,' he said in a grating voice, made grittier by his helm.

'You're grinning, Marr,' said Scybale. 'Why are you grinning? That bastard Meduson has taken everything.'

Tybalt Marr nodded. As the captain reached out he took his proffered helm from one of the silent honour guard.

'He has,' said Marr, donning the helm, the transverse crest sat proud across the crown. 'Indeed, he has.'

They did not linger after that. The small war party, just a handful of the Sons of Horus, left Hamart III to burn. A prowling Stormbird came to retrieve them, its hot jet wash stirring the reek of slow decay that had settled on the ransacked supply dump. From there, the *Lupercal Pursuivant* beckoned.

Throughout transit, Tybalt Marr grinned to himself.

Yes, he thought, *Meduson has taken everything*.

'We cannot do both,' said Kernag flatly.

His words echoed around the sepulchral chamber, one of old Nerrovorn. A shrine built to honour the dead of Nerrovorn's wars, it had, ironically, survived the world's annihilation. No use in killing what has already died. Ranks of tombs lined the walls, one upon the next, stretching all the way to a vaulted dome ceiling. Constellations had been painted across it, truly artisanal, but faded with age and neglect. No one lived to restore them now, and so they would diminish into obscurity and extinction just like the rest of Nerrovorn, and without a single

blow struck.

A statue, exquisitely detailed and three times the height of the Iron Fathers, stood in the middle of the mortuary chamber, a broad circle of flagstones radiating around it creating a communal plaza. Whether it depicted a general, a politico or an artist was no longer clear; the man's life, celebrated in dark marble, had become as irrelevant as the death of his civilisation. Like so much else in the galaxy, war had erased it.

'We cannot do both,' Kernag repeated, a strong and certain determination in his eyes.

He and his cohorts stood in the shadow of the statue, on one side of the plaza. Their voices carried, outwards and upwards across the shrine, the only structure on a remote moon with an atmosphere dense enough to support life. Too small for any other use, its purpose had been given over to that of a mausoleum.

'Either we serve Meduson's vainglory or we pledge for the Legion's survival,' Norsson agreed, his voice affected by the ever-present undertow of cold anger. 'This Shadrak *Smyth* does not speak for Medusa.'

Raask Arkborne nodded, the implanted servos in his neck grinding noisily. He stifled a mechanised tremor in his damaged bionic arm, the effort visible on his severely battle-scarred face.

'How can a Terran dictate our Legion's future?' he said. 'His boldness is dangerously pugnacious.'

'His emotions and desires cloud his good sense,' said Rawt, folding his powerful arms. 'The flesh is weak, Fraters.'

They nodded, this clandestine gathering, those whose battleships awaited the return of the escorts sent to retrieve them, a minor delay that would raise no suspicions.

'The flesh is weak,' the others chorused, a grating monotone that spoke of cold, repressible logic.

'What, then, can we do?' asked another voice, and Jebez Aug leaned forwards into the light. His form shimmered with projection distortion, the natural communications rebuff of the region fouling the hololithic link. 'I share your concerns, Fraters. Shadrak Meduson never wanted this burden. It has fallen to him, and I take a measure of responsibility for that. He finds himself in unfamiliar waters.'

'He is not nearly flesh-spare enough,' said Arkborne, his own misfiring bionics hardly a testament in favour of mechanised substitution. 'If that could be remedied…'

‘I doubt he will submit to further augmentation without just cause,’ said Norsson, fists clenched.

‘He won’t,’ Aug agreed. ‘And even if he did, his humours run too hot these days.’

‘What is your belief then, Frater?’ asked Kernag.

Aug’s expression, his true expression, remained utterly cold.

‘That we must secede from the war, but to do that Shadrak Meduson must be overturned as Warleader. If we are to survive as a Legion then that is our only logical course.’ He turned to regard a looming shadow, a figure much larger than the others sitting at the edge of the plaza next to the tombs. The figure did not move, but its armour and bionics gave off a low machine purr. A phalanx of silent Immortals stood guard, also hidden in shadow.

‘Meduson must embrace the way of the machine,’ affirmed Rawt, ‘or he must be removed. For the sake of the Iron Tenth. Is this the will of the Gorgon?’

‘We are the Gorgon,’ said Aug, ‘his cult, his machine cult. From flesh are stronger bonds formed in iron.’

The Immortals slammed down their breacher shields as one, raising a discordant chime.

Kernag, Norsson, Rawt and Arkborne all turned, but it was Aug who addressed the enthroned king in their midst.

‘Is this your will?’ he said. ‘Is this the Gorgon’s will?’

The figure’s right hand lifted slightly. One of the fingers was missing.

The Fraters took this as confirmation, and bowed as one.

EIGHT

Fates, yet obscured

Barthusa Narek stood alone in the ruins of a city. He could not remember how he had arrived here, and did not recognise his surroundings. He knew it wasn't Nocturne.

He considered he might be dead, and this some pale and unimpressive aftermath, a purgatory that he knew he deserved.

Endless destruction stretched in every direction. Collapsed habitation blocks sat forlornly in rubble-strewn heaps, upper floors entombing the lower. Devastated commercia districts spoke of sundered merchant houses and ruined trade posts. Streets and avenues, broken and split underfoot, led to chasms and dead ends. Communal gardens burned, statues well felled, fountains befouled. Culture and reason and prosperity, all laid to waste. Old lives lingered still, at least their shells and trappings did, like shadows reluctant to fade at the passing of the sun.

Narek stooped to run his hand through the dust blowing across the desolate landscape. His finger came back white and he detected ash as he put it to his tongue. Human remains, burned pure in the fires of immolation.

Old lives, he reminded himself.

The manner of the city's demise he *did* recognise. Such utter annihilation could only have come from Legiones Astartes weapons, a devastating lance strike from high orbit akin to the birthing of a nascent sun. All would look upon it and despair, before darkness robbed their sight forever.

Narek wandered on, not knowing where he was going or even why, save that any warrior worthy of the name who finds himself in unfamiliar environs will scout out the territory. It appeared deserted. He tried to find a vantage from which he might get his bearings, but the city had been all but flattened.

Passing into what used to be a large esplanade, a dirty river flowing along one side, he noticed the fragments of an archway, perhaps a gate. It had been finely wrought once, bright and golden, celebratory. Statues had lined it, standing tall at the summit of marble columns, their wings outstretched, their holy visages…

'*Angels?*' murmured Narek, initially alarmed at the flat, echoless sound of his voice. Some of the fragments of marble were shaped like feathery wings. As he regarded them more closely, he noticed the odd washed-out hue and thought at first the mason's stone had simply been bland. Then he looked across at the river and found the same bleached appearance. His own armour looked similarly drained.

He held up a gauntleted hand to the pale sun, disturbed by the faintest glow of light shining through it, as if metal, flesh and bone had become translucent. The entire city, despite its sights, its smells, had an unreal lustre.

Pyres stood on the horizon, distant enough to be indistinct, close enough to taste the burnt dead heaped upon them.

Someone lived though, slowly walking through the wisps of fading smoke.

Narek went to draw his blade, but found he had none. He had no bolter either. No matter. Even unarmed, he could kill this cur if he proved to be a threat.

An old man dressed in rags, holding a gnarled staff, resolved through the smoke and dust. Narek's face soured further as he recognised him.

'You old bastard,' Narek called, starting towards him. 'Did you bring me here? Are you a witch? Is that how you did it?' he asked, and then in a quieter voice, 'Or are you some Neverborn *thing?*'

His earlier confidence diminished a little at the thought.

'I am neither, Bearer of the Word,' the old man replied, though he had not moved his lips.

'You are a sorcerer, then,' accused Narek, and wished he had a blade. 'Or I am dead. Either way, consider me displeased.'

'You are not dead, Bearer of the Word, though you would have been had we remained on Nocturne.'

'Then I owe you a debt, do I?'

'Perhaps…'

Narek looked around, then back to his hand again and the light shining through it.

'Well, this is unsettling.'

The old man smiled, as an elder might to a child in need of encouragement.

'I have never been in a psyker's mind before,' said Narek, before eyeing the old

man shrewdly. ‘It is a wretched vista, thin and unconvincing. Even the stink of the dead is lacking.’

‘It is not my mind, Barthusa,’ said the old man, who was suddenly standing next to him. ‘It is yours.’

Narek fought every instinct not to react. Instead, he looked down.

The old man held a rifle, and proffered it to Narek.

‘So is this. A Brontos-pattern.’

Narek gently took the weapon and felt the markings he had made there. He knew every curve, every piece of it. The bolt-action reload for specialised ammunition, the cored barrel, the well-worn rest, the iron sights, the precision targeter, the short clip, and its sheer killing potential.

A sniper’s weapon. *His* weapon.

Or, at least, a memory of it.

‘Impossible…’

‘Actually,’ said the old man, ‘obtaining that was comparatively easy.’

‘And unreal.’ Narek snapped the rifle across his knee, the two halves splintering down the middle before collapsing into the same dust that plagued the sundered cityscape. ‘Easy compared to what?’ he asked.

The old man smiled again, but evinced little warmth or humour.

‘You are a brutal instrument, Barthusa.’

‘And you smile overly. It is irksome.’ Narek took a forward step, his demeanour calm but menacing. ‘Twice you have used my given name, and I am none the wiser as to yours. Mindscape or not, I warn you, don’t do it again.’

The old man nodded, unperturbed, unconcerned.

‘As you wish. I have need of you, Bearer of the Word,’ he said, and held out his hand.

Resting in the palm, a small stone sliver gave off a faint aura that drew Narek’s eye.

His voice came out as a breathless rasp. ‘How did you get that?’

‘With considerably more difficulty than your rifle.’

Narek met the old man’s gaze, and found a pair of eldritch eyes peering back.

‘Who are you? What is this place?’

‘It is the Quami district, it is Tophet, and it is Gulshia.’

Narek’s eyes became slits. ‘The perfect city… How?’

‘You called it Monarchia.’

‘I never went there,’ said Narek, curt, dismissive.

‘Then I wonder why it lingers in your mind? Have you seen it, seen the

devastation your kinsmen inflicted upon it? It was razed to ash. Curious that you chose to only partly restore it.'

The Bearer of the Word smirked, unimpressed. 'Is this where you tell me I am the desolation, that the purpose you spoke of on the mountain will restore this city and somehow myself? I am not overly fond of metaphor. You may not have noticed, but I have a preference that leans towards killing, not poetry,' said Narek, his hands unclenching. 'I need no weapon to kill you. If this is indeed my mind, I imagine your forced removal from it would be painful. Tell me who you are.'

'Your preference towards killing is precisely why I need you,' the old man replied, stepping back.

Narek snorted. 'And this is where you throw off your cloak in a flash of–'

The blow against Narek's temple forced him to one knee. His vision blackened, and he gasped at the sheer strength of the old man. He rose swiftly, head throbbing, off balance but eager for retribution and found a sword at his throat. Runes glinted on the blade, inhuman, suggesting power.

Narek pulled up short as a bead of blood materialised on the blade's edge where it touched his skin. Mastering his anger, he looked up into the true face of his attacker and laughed aloud.

'I knew it. The eyes gave you away… *eldar*.'

Eldrad Ulthran regarded the beast he had heeled, knowing he would soon have to slip him from the leash.

Sweeping aside his robes, he sheathed his witchblade. The act of drawing it had been a theatrical indulgence, more in keeping with the sons and daughters of the Laughing God.

In this place where ostensible reality bent to his will, he had no need to draw his sword. Still, the point had been made.

'I am a seer,' said Eldrad, speaking to Narek through the mask of his Ghosthelm.

'The armour you wear under those robes says otherwise,' said Narek, rising to his feet and rubbing the side of his skull where Eldrad had struck him. 'I suppose this isn't real pain I am feeling.'

'Oh, it is real. The pain is the mind convulsing.'

'You struck my mind? That's low, even for xenos.'

'I do not care for that word.'

'Then I shall employ it more often. You still haven't told me who you are.'

‘I *am* a seer, one of Ulthwé. Eldrad. Eldrad Nuirasha Ulthran.’

‘Is that meant to mean something to me? I am unimpressed, witch. And what does a *seer* need with someone like me? A renegade, a zealot. A Bearer of the Word.’

‘And whose Word do you bear, Barthusa Narek?’

Narek’s eye strayed to the sliver of fulgurite still nestled in Eldrad’s open hand.

On the horizon a second sun began to dawn, more vibrant than the pale reflection hanging in the ethereal sky.

‘I warned you about that.’

‘And you now know my given name.’

‘Familiarity was contingent on it being reciprocal…’

‘Then I lied about not using it. Are you usually this petulant, Barthusa, or is it because your father called you by that name?’

‘I have no love for him, or you,’ Narek replied, and Eldrad could tell he was right.

‘But this is different, isn’t it,’ he said, holding the fulgurite sliver between thumb and forefinger. ‘You felt his power, didn’t you, his immortal nature?’

The sun’s light brightened, touching Narek’s grey armour in gilded shafts.

Through sheer will, Narek averted his gaze and Eldrad closed his hand, hiding the sliver like a conjurer vanishes a coin.

‘I am no pawn,’ said Narek.

‘I do not need a pawn. I need an assassin.’

‘And you think I am oathed to you, do you? Because I owe you my life?’

‘No, I think you will do it because you like killing, and because I can give you what you want.’

‘Which is?’

‘A means to reach *him*.’

A nerve tensed along Narek’s jawline, visible under his scarred skin.

‘Don’t you eldar have killers, or don’t you believe in murder? Too cold for your xenos blood?’

‘I asked you not to use that word,’ Eldrad warned, but left it at that. ‘And, yes, we have killers. Many, and they are stunningly proficient. Alas, *I* only have you. This war is not the eldar’s. It is mankind’s. Most of my race has no wish to be involved, though some are entirely too involved. I wish to see mankind endure, others of my kind do not. You are crude, base creatures, barely primordial in their eyes, and doomed to repeat history.’

Narek gave a wry smile. ‘Is this an eldar attempt at flattery?’ He leaned in

closer, conspiratorially. ‘It has missed the mark, I am afraid. I have no stake in this war.’

He winced, half turning at the sun, rising fast.

‘I doubt you even convinced yourself of that. You have a stake. It is personal, yes, but a stake none the less. Fate, Barthusa Narek, is of *great* concern to you, I think. Your own, that of your brothers, your father’s…’

A tremor below Narek’s eye betrayed him.

‘Yes, I thought so,’ said Eldrad, seeing all. ‘Fate is occluded to me. It is important for you to understand how absurd this notion is. I am not merely a seer, I am a *far*seer, and can discern the skeins of fate as easily as the scars upon your brutish face. It is a litany of suffering, Barthusa Narek. A map of your pain.’ Eldrad shook his head, almost surprised at the alliance he was trying to forge. ‘You are indeed an ugly beast.’

Narek weighed that up in the expression on his face, and deemed it fair.

‘Closer to the mark that time, xenos.’

Glad that his helm hid the scowl on his face, Eldrad went on.

‘Your primitive mind would baulk at the sheer immensity of the skeins of fate, so think of them as a web, intersecting, overlapping, myriad in complexity. A mind such as mine can navigate this web, cutting some strands, preserving others. A cohort of creatures, a cabal – some of whom are my kin, others… *older* – seek to manipulate fate. More than that, they have done so on several occasions. I desire to redress the balance.

‘They have certain agents, remarkable individuals who can cheat fate. Immortals of a kind. Persistent. Each strand of fate attached to such a being vibrates. It moves so fast that even for a mind as accomplished as mine the skein becomes obscured. Fate literally *blurs*. I must prevent such vibrations. Only then can I set matters upon the proper path. You, Barthusa Narek, are precisely who I need to still the skeins of fate, to still the web.’

‘Kill these immortals?’ said Narek. ‘How? If they are what you say they are, then how can one even as *accomplished* in killing as I murder them?’ He sounded rueful, but distracted.

The light burned. Smoke rose in uncoiling tendrils from Narek’s armour.

‘What is–’ he began.

A distant figure stood surrounded by the light of that golden sun. He carried a flaming sword and wore a laurel crown.

Eldrad smiled, as a master would to his hound. ‘You are amusing to me, Barthusa Narek.’

‘I will be markedly less so when we are face-to-face. I have killed witches before – your kind, others. It matters not. You will use the fulgurite, or I will.’

The light overtook them, but not just light, fire too – a storm of it, heralded by the rising sun.

‘Ever surprising are you, Barthusa Narek,’ Eldrad said calmly. ‘Yes, though not all will require it.’

‘It proves the Emperor’s divinity.’ Narek had to bellow against the roaring firestorm. His skin prickled. What little hair he possessed began to burn.

‘And as such it has divine power,’ Eldrad replied without concern, seemingly heedless of the purifying flames, ‘*His* power,’ he said, and acknowledged the conflagration coming towards them for the first time. ‘And you know that with it even gods, or those claiming to be gods, can die.’

‘How do you know I’ll help you?’ Narek shouted, trying to turn, but the light blinded, and Eldrad knew he would barely be able to hear his own voice; that searing heat would be coursing down his throat, burning his lungs…

Untouched by fire, Eldrad smiled one last time.

‘Fate.’

And the fire crashed against them both, drowning the ruins of the perfect city in immolation.

Far from sight, far from notice, cloistered away most safely, a farmer tended to his fields.

He had done so every day since he had come to the farm. He had basked in the low, warming sun; he had breathed deeply of the air. He had listened to nature, and he had gratefully accepted the aches and pains of his labours at the end of each day.

But as he stood amongst the crops for harvest, an expansive yellow belt of wheat akin to that which might still be found on Iax, he stopped sharply and looked up.

He felt something. A change in the wind. A presaging of inclement weather, perhaps. A hunter hiding in the crop in search of food, for there were herd-beasts on the farm too.

No, not a hunter.

The farmer’s gaze strayed to the man sitting on the stoop to his agri barn. A thin trail of blue-grey smoke escaped in the parting of his lips. He watched the farmer ceaselessly, waving his hand in a dismissive manner.

All is well. Carry on.

The sense of change lingered. The farmer went back to his crops.

NINE

Opening salvoes, well met

Possessed of either arrogance or sheer stupidity, the cruiser's crew took the bait.

A modest-sized ship, Dauntless-class, its name was the *Cthonic Blood*. A sea-green livery and the eye emblazoned on its hull left its allegiance in no doubt.

Sons of Horus.

Every ship in the flotilla flew the Warmaster's colours, rigid in the airless void. Brutish, ugly vessels, they nonetheless looked capable and bristled with guns. But the *Cthonic Blood* had strayed, reacting to a faint signal return. Another ship, a known vessel of a war cell belonging to Shadrak Meduson had appeared on long-range augur. So the *Cthonic Blood* had decreased engine speed and begun to come about. Interference from the sporadic solar flares in this region of space was fouling ship-to-ship vox, but the ship's captain had every reason to feel confident. He had a pair of heavily armed destroyers to port and starboard, hovering in the upper and lower battlespheres relative to the *Cthonic Blood*.

He would eliminate this errant vessel and return to the flotilla in short order.

Or so Nuros imagined.

On the bridge of the *Saurod*, the Salamander gave a feral grin beneath his helm's faceplate. A pugnacious vessel, the *Saurod* had no voids, instead relying upon an all-encompassing sheath of adamantium armour plate. Scarred and pitted along both flanks, ventral and dorsal aspects, it had the demeanour of a hoary old drake too stubborn to die.

Nuros liked it very much. It wasn't his vessel, in that he was not its captain, but it represented that last shred of Nocturne, a world he expected never to see again. A shame that it would have to earn more scar tissue. Wounds upon wounds, he thought, and supposed the *Saurod* was not so unlike everyone in Meduson's

company.

'What about *Bloodtooth?*' he said across the vox, taking his leave of the bridge and signalling the warriors in his retinue to follow. More awaited him in the launch bays. Pyroclasts. Last of a dying breed, he thought.

'*Is something wrong with just "sword"?*' Lumak's voice replied from another ship, the *Gorgon's Will*, several hundred kilometres away in the Warleader's fleet.

Nuros scowled, running along one of the spinal corridors that led down to the launch bays. At least the *Saurod* was a relatively straightforward ship, he reflected, as the first salvoes from the Sons of Horus cruiser smacked against the hull. 'No art, you Medusans. No poetry. Too prosaic, my iron-hided brother. I shall suggest another.'

Armour shook, so did the corridor, but the worst of the broadsides was absorbed. The *Saurod*'s engines burned hot, much like the blood of its warriors. Before Vulkan, the XVIII Legion had been a self-destructive breed. No matter the odds, no matter the cost, they fought every war as though it were a war of attrition. Retreat would not be countenanced. Death was preferable. Extinction had loomed, genuinely. Only with their primarch's tempering influence had the Legion survived, and learned to fight a different way.

Nuros wondered if, with Vulkan's death, they were destined to backslide towards self-annihilation again. He smiled sadly. At least that notion had some poetry to it.

'*Vanquish*, that's a good name,' he said, barrelling through the last ventral corridor, hunched against the close confines of the ship. Emerging through a blast door, the space opened out at once into a frenetic launch bay. Sirens blared, warning of the imminence of attack and of repeated damage sustained. Announcements crackled over the vox-casters, broken and indistinct.

'A tad presumptuous, perhaps,' conceded Nuros, 'but all the best names are. Hyperbole, that is what you need to reach for, Lumak.'

The Avernii captain grunted with disdain, and severed the link.

'Do I hear reluctant agreement?' the Salamander asked, feigning surprise, speaking to static. Lumak had his own battles to fight. Time Nuros went to his. He had reached the launches, a battered quartet of gunships readying for his and his warriors' departure. Servitors and dirty deck crews scurried.

Four partial squads of Pyroclasts stood ready too, their flame gauntlets unlit but eager. The remnants of a tactical support squad made up the rest of the complement, two carrying breacher shields. It was an uneven but battle-hardened

party. Even with Nuros and his men, they numbered less than sixty. Only one amongst the boarders eschewed drakescale-green, and Nuros nodded to him as the ramps of the gunships opened in needlessly dramatic unison.

'Are you here to keep me alive, son of Corax?'

'Solemnly, I must,' Kaylar Norn replied. He wore the prime helix on his left kneepad and had a red stripe bifurcating the conical nose of his war-helm. Unlike some of the Apothecarion, Norn maintained his Legion's forbidding heraldry.

Nuros laughed, derisive, but clapped Norn on the shoulder guard as he passed by.

'To death then?' he said, nonchalant.

'Yours or mine?' asked Norn, his mood as black as his armour.

Nuros just laughed louder.

Of all the Legions sundered at Isstvan, the Salamanders had suffered the worst. Not least of the harm done was the irreparable damage sustained by their Apothecary cadres, which had resulted in a severe shortage of battlefield surgeons and a grim cessation of the collecting of gene-seed from the dead or mortally injured.

Considering the latter, the prognosis for the Legion was bleak, but at least Norn's presence could help to redress the former. He followed Nuros up the ramp. As it closed behind him, the darkness of the hold engulfed them both.

Shadrak Meduson watched the hololith, his right hand on the pommel of his Albian sword.

A formation of red icons rendered up as basic battleship outlines was strung out across the battlesphere, the three-dimensional region in which void combat took place. With the rest of the *Iron Heart*'s bridge in darkness, the hololithic display lit the hard contours of the Warleader's armour in washed-out grey, emphasising the lines.

Somewhere in the shadows, the bridge crew silently toiled, hunched over consoles, waiting, as pensive as their captain.

Another group of icons, this time in green, lurked at the periphery of the image. Except for one.

The ironclad known as the *Saurod* burned hard towards a light cruiser at the rear of the flotilla. A data-feed to the right of the illuminated field of engagement showed that the *Cthonic Blood* had already changed course and launched an attack. A salvo of plasma torpedoes struck the *Saurod*'s heavy armour, their

trajectories each marked by a broken parabolic line to varying degrees of curve.

At present, only a pair of destroyers had joined the larger ship. The rest of the flotilla carried on, unaware that their befouled communications had been caused by design, not solar radiation.

This region was known as the Zanaeh Gulf, an unimportant part of the void but one fraught with celestial phenomena anathema to the unimpeded function of both sensors and long-range vox.

Meduson had chosen it deliberately for an ambush only made possible by the intelligence gleaned from Hamart III.

'I think our Nocturnean cousin enjoys taking a beating,' said Mechosa, coming to stand beside his Warleader.

Meduson blinked and felt the sting of his dry eyes. He grimaced, prompting a mildly concerned enquiry from the Sorrgol captain.

'Just a little retina burn,' said Meduson. 'But you're right,' he added, gently kneading both eye sockets with thumb and forefinger, 'he does enjoy a beating. Proves he's still strong.'

'He's a masochist,' Mechosa replied.

'Aren't we all, brother?'

It had been a labour of extreme proportions preparing for and executing this attack. Days had gone into sounding out tactics and ship dispositions; the gauging of martial strength, both allied and enemy; assessing the proposed expenditure of ammunition and fuel; and estimating casualties. It had been a careful and meticulous balancing of effort against reward.

It had been arduous both gathering the various war cells and then convincing them of the sense in this endeavour, especially the Iron Fathers. But the battleships of Atraxii, Felg, Raukaan and Garrsak had all joined the fleet.

Fleet? Meduson laughed to himself at the word. *Not yet, but soon*.

Autek Mor, at the helm of the *Red Talon,* commanded a sizeable number of ships and warriors, and Meduson harboured faint hopes that he would be willing to conjoin their resources. Mor had an independent streak, a warrior both arrogant and egotistical. He might just as easily stay to reap the battle spoils and then depart to wherever he saw fit. So be it, thought Meduson; his grand cruiser alone would be a great asset in the fight to come.

The flotilla outnumbered them and contained a host of frigates, but several cruisers too, the largest vessels to the front and rear of the formation. Smaller, more heavily armed destroyers roamed like outriders. These ships would have to be dealt with first. Meduson's plan relied on the masters of the flotilla being

overconfident and spread across a vast distance. They would be slow to manoeuvre, and take time to react – and react they would. He needed a way to split their forces, to deal with the flotilla piecemeal. Only the destroyers had the necessary speed to complicate that plan.

Nuros had already drawn out two, leaving the *Saurod* exposed in the process.

'They are bringing broadsides to bear,' Mechosa murmured. He half turned to the Warleader. 'Can it take that kind of punishment?'

Meduson's gaze never left the oculus.

'We are about to find out.'

The *Saurod* rocked with thunderous impacts that sent warning alerts across every vox-speaker and console.

Nuros watched the damage reports on his helm display, calm and quiet as he sat in the hold of the assault craft. An all-clear signal flashed up across his right retinal lens from the shipmaster, prompting Nuros to issue the launch order to all pilots.

Across the deck, maintenance crews scattered into shielded observation blisters or behind blast barriers. Inside the hold, an icon flared from red to green as the launch tubes irised open and thrusters burned in throaty concert across the four gunships.

Nuros engaged the vox, switching the channel to address all hands in the assault party.

'Remember our blood, red and thick on the sand,' he said, provoking a chorus of thudding sword hilts and stamping boots against the deck. 'Remember their traitor's blades in our backs.'

One Salamander bellowed a wordless oath of revenge. Another pressed his forehead to his sword in silent avowal. Across the holds of all four ships, fingers already grasping weapons tightened further.

'Whatever alliance you once knew with any of these bastards is dead. It died with your brothers. It died with Vulkan, and with Ferrus Manus. We go to fight our enemies. Let's kill them.'

The pilot voxed a commencement warning. Grav-harnesses descended and warriors leaned back to accept them, mag-locking boots and weapons.

Nuros closed his eyes, smiling darkly at the thought of what was to come. A chance to vent his hatred.

The thrusters kicked, jolting the gunship forwards at speed. For a few seconds as they hurtled through the launch tube, a fist of pressure slammed Nuros against

the back of the grav-bench, until they cleared the *Saurod* and speared out into the void.

The gunships flew in a loose formation, keeping beneath the *Saurod* and using the lee of its ventral aspect as cover. The larger ship surged towards the light cruiser before them, its armoured prow soaking up every pounding broadside. Almost all power had been diverted to main engines, its plasma drives white-hot with effort, its cowlings turned soot-black. A furtive lance strike from the *Saurod* flashed silently across the void, sending magnesium-bright light arcing through viewslits.

Several thousand kilometres of space, threaded with the beams of laser batteries and torpedo discharge, gaped between the two ships. The equivalent of close quarters combat in void-war terms.

The *Saurod* intended to get closer still and took a blistering amount of punishment doing so. Ablative armour sloughed off its prow like shed skin. Some of it drifted into the ironclad's wake forcing its diminutive fighters into evasive manoeuvres.

Nuros felt the pitch and yaw inside the hold as their pilot made rapid course adjustments. Something struck the hull, a glancing blow that sent the gunship spiralling. Its airframe groaned in protest, struts bent to breaking point, but eventually the gunship straightened out again.

Two destroyers loomed out of the void dark, shark-like, hungry. Faster than the light cruiser by degrees, they had pulled ahead of the larger ship and come to engage the ironclad.

Prow-lances seared through cold space, sawing at the *Saurod'*s armour.

The destroyers roamed on alternate flanks, enfilading beams spearing from both port and starboard. They drove ahead of the ironclad's prow to avoid the thickest armour and instead cut at its more vulnerable belly. Ventral cannons trembled with muted roars, spitting out immense shells that chased the hunting pair but failed to connect.

As one of the destroyers came in close, Nuros saw its pitted hull through a viewslit. Less than two kilometres long, it was a sleek and angular predator.

It saw them too, still over a thousand kilometres away, and lit its deck guns. A desultory barrage would tear the gunships apart.

Nuros dared not blink. He gripped the hilt of his sword, for a warrior should always die with a weapon in his hand, and mouthed a silent oath.

Vulkan lives.

The icons on the hololith had closed so that they almost overlapped.

The *Saurod* had the bulk and the endurance, but against three vessels she was outmatched.

But Meduson watched the darkness below the engagement, an apparently empty tract of void space. And as the coreward end of the flotilla began to react to the ambusher in their midst, the Warleader's fists clenched.

'Do it now,' he ordered.

The first destroyer came apart in a spectacular explosion moments before it could unleash its guns and wipe out Nuros and his fighters. A spread of torpedoes struck it amidships. A first salvo overloaded the shields. A second, delivered in rapid succession, cored the vessel and inflicted catastrophic damage upon its engines. The resulting chain reaction tore the destroyer apart.

If its twin reacted, it did so too slowly. A lance beam speared into its prow. Stricken, unable to immediately retaliate and unsure from where the attack had originated, the destroyer began to retreat and come about. A second lance salvo, more ferocious than the first, disabled its plasma drives and put paid to its shields for good.

Streams of coolant and fuel spilled from a ragged wound in its hull. Under reserve engine power, it tried to limp from the engagement sphere, a former predator now become prey.

Dalcoth chose this moment to pounce, the sleek black contours of the *Stormcrow* emerging from the void darkness. Nigh invisible to augur, defying all but the most diligent sensor sweep, the frigate loomed into the crippled destroyer's battlesphere and applied the killing blow.

Nuros laughed out loud when he saw it, relief and vindication coursing through his blood.

Nuros lives, he thought and watched the *Saurod* drive inexorably towards its prey.

He wanted to praise Dalcoth, but knew the ship had muted all vox. Instead, he reached over and rapped his knuckles fraternally against Norn's shoulder guard.

Ever reserved, the Apothecary did concede the triumph by tapping the white raven emblazoned on his breastplate.

'That'll do, Norn,' said Nuros, boisterous. 'That'll do just fine.'

'The gauntlet is far from run yet,' Norn replied.

Nuros laughed, thick and hearty, the fire in his belly unquenchable.

'Now there's the bleak-hearted Kiavahran I know.'

But despite his good humour, Nuros understood the son of Corax was right.

A relentless fusillade from the *Cthonic Blood*'s laser batteries hammered the *Saurod*. For the cruiser's crew, desperation had set in with the chilling certainty that the hulking Salamanders vessel would not stop.

Nuros felt his gunship's engines slacken off, their speed decreasing as the formation rapidly fell back behind the *Saurod*. The ironclad braced to ram the *Cthonic Blood*, weathering a storm of fire from every weapon its enemy could bring to bear.

A lance strike raked the *Cthonic Blood*'s exposed flank, stripping shields in a succession of blistering iridescent energy blooms. Less than a thousand kilometres stood between the two ships now, quickly diminishing thanks to the *Saurod*'s ruthless engine burn.

At last the ironclad's scarred prow, a piercing draconic snout, touched the *Cthonic Blood*'s already weakened defences. The cruiser's shields gave out in a silent flare of failing power, unravelling across the vessel's port side like dry parchment devoured by fire.

No time remained to reignite them. Its lances still firing, tearing apart gun ports and shredding armour, the *Saurod* struck the *Cthonic Blood* like an impaling spear and kept going.

Nuros had seen void ships collide before, most memorably at Isstvan. Across the entire upper atmosphere, cruisers and frigates had run into one another as all efforts towards a coordinated withdrawal had broken down. Even transhuman composure could not entirely subsume panic when given a choice between escape and annihilation.

Great warships had broken apart as a rash of noiseless detonations erupted throughout the tangled fleet. Some vessels fell with slow inevitability, trailing gas, vapour and flash-frozen corpses. Others disintegrated as their reactors blew, turning the void into a radiation-choked debris field, swallowing smaller escorts in their violent death throes. Severed and bleeding, entire decks cleaved off and spinning, their screaming crews trapped within, the ships of the loyalist fleet had been so densely arrayed that they had wrought much of their own destruction.

The mauling of the *Cthonic Blood* proved no less devastating to the flotilla.

A gouge had been carved in its flanks, void ice rapidly coating the ragged tear, and men and materiel spilled out like seeds cast for harvest. The only reaper here, though, was death.

Secondary explosions erupted along the seam of the vessel's hull as munitions and combustibles cooked off after the collision.

The *Saurod* had come to a stop, bleeding too, its prow badly damaged and its forward lances inoperable. It had cast the spear, transfixing its prey, but now it had to withdraw. Engine burn lit the viewslits in Nuros' gunship, as the *Saurod* engaged its reverse thrusters.

It slowly pulled back but did so messily, wrenching chunks of the enemy ship with it.

With the *Saurod'*s brutal withdrawal, the four gunships that had sat patiently in its shadow surged forwards, arrowing through the debris field and straight for the gap in the *Cthonic Blood'*s abused flank.

A battery of nose-mounted heavy bolters scythed a path into the ship, despatching defenders summoned to repel boarders. They fought in a sea of floating bodies, amongst the dead who had not been violently ejected into space when the ship's atmospheric integrity was breached.

Some of the defenders wore flimsy atmosphere suits and rebreathers, mortal armsmen with ineffective lascarbines. Other had power armour, legionaries with heavier weapons that posed a genuine threat. One of the gunships was winged, its left engine flaring as it careened into the side of the *Cthonic Blood* before it could right itself.

Nuros scowled as a host of icons on his helm display lit up amber then red.

The other three ships forced a landing, killing the last elements of defiance with punitive bursts from their forward-mounted cannons. Ramps slammed down, silent, aggressive, and a boarding party of angry Salamanders and one Raven Guard charged out.

Nuros quickly established a perimeter, glancing at the chrono in his helm as he signalled a squad to remain behind and secure their landing zone. The rest, he urged forwards.

Bulkheads had come down in the wake of the attack, sealing off the other parts of the ship not gutted by the *Saurod'*s prow ram, but Nuros sent two of his warriors to breach them with charges.

Paired melta bombs detonated in eerie silence, turning a blast door to molten slag. Answering gunfire came through the breach, the edges still red-hot but cooling rapidly.

Nuros descended into a thicket of las-beams, flanked by the two legionaries with breacher shields. Two ranks of carbines, one line standing and the other crouched, opposed them, the mortals firing sustained bursts. The shields took the worst of it, before volkites and bolters issued a devastating return volley. Blood, ash and bone painted the walls in grim silhouettes, matter flash-seared into the

metal.

The defenders clung on for a few more seconds before being overwhelmed.

Taking the corridor, the Salamanders sealed an inner door behind them. With re-pressurisation, atmosphere and gravity returned too. Breaching the next door, Nuros led the Drakes inwards and beckoned the Pyroclasts into the vanguard.

The *Cthonic Blood*'s defenders had reacted with impressive speed considering the blow they had sustained. Barricades had been set, choke points established and heavier cannons brought to bear. As a body stricken by illness musters white blood cells to root out and eliminate infection, so too did the *Cthonic Blood* respond to the interlopers at large on her decks.

Determined as they were, mortal armsmen could not resist legionaries for long. Six well-defended and well-armoured barricades each fell in seconds, scorched to ruin. Norn tended to what few injuries had been sustained but they were minor and did not reduce the efficacy of the boarders or their martial strength.

The first blow had been to grab attention; the second was the killing thrust. Nuros and his warriors had but to apply it.

The Salamander checked his chrono. An approximation of the ship's layout tracked across the same retinal display, rendered as a flat technical schematic.

Proximate to the Salamanders' position were the aft munitions stores and the ship's main armoury. They would be well defended, and as Nuros gave the signal to advance he saw familiar bio-signatures via his auto-senses.

'They're coming,' he murmured over the vox, shouldering his caliver, eager for the attention of old allies. He drew his blade instead. 'They're coming…'

TEN

Iron and fire, as one

‘The *Saurod* withdraws,’ intoned Jebez Aug, a silent partner on the bridge of the *Iron Heart* until that moment.

Meduson nodded, restive. Even from the rudimentary description afforded by the hololith, he could see the tactical landscape changing. With the annihilation of the two destroyers, another two ships from the flotilla had altered course, coming about to engage the retreating *Saurod* and the smaller but no less deadly *Stormcrow*.

‘Nuros and Dalcoth will be on the run now,’ said Mechosa, as intent on the battle display as his Warleader. ‘Do we intercede?’

‘Not yet,’ Meduson said quickly, shaking his head.

Frenetic spools of data fed across the hololith. A broken line manifested across the display.

‘They are range-finding,’ said Aug in a hushed voice.

Since its triumphs, the *Stormcrow* had successfully disengaged from the battlesphere but had begun to turn to help defend the wounded ironclad.

‘We hold,’ said Meduson. ‘Those are Sons of Horus ships. I won’t commit until they are severely disadvantaged.’

‘And Nuros and Dalcoth?’ asked Aug.

Mechosa’s studied silence suggested he had the same question in his mind but chose not to voice it.

Meduson looked sidelong at the Iron Father.

‘No plan is without risk. We cannot act until they are separated. Are the other Fraters in position?’

‘They await your signal, Warleader.’

‘Including Mor?’

Aug scowled. ‘The *Red Talon* and his other ships are still with us.’

‘There is something more?’ asked Meduson.

‘Lumak thinks he’s waiting to see if you’re killed during the battle so he can assume command.’

Meduson laughed without mirth.

‘The Avernii see treachery everywhere they look, even amongst allies.’

‘Don’t you too, Warleader?’

‘Of course, but I don’t plan on dying during this battle either. Mor need only do his part. I hope he joins us, but if he has his own plans then so be it. For now, he serves the mutual good, so let’s put that dread reputation of his to use. I will not eschew any weapon in my arsenal. I cannot.’

‘Even if that blade has a double edge?’

Meduson nodded, acknowledging the risk, but remained unmoved. ‘I will simply keep it at arm’s length.’

A third vessel broke off from the flotilla, effectively splitting the Sons of Horus into two smaller formations. Two more destroyers, the last of the complement, came with it, scenting revenge.

‘The Sixteenth are excellent warriors, and do not underestimate how difficult it was for me to say that, but they are also prideful,’ said Meduson. ‘Mechosa, give the signal. The vanguard shall engage.’

Mechosa saluted and went to his orders.

‘And the Fraters?’ Aug asked.

‘Await second signal. And that includes Mor. We have to cut them in half, Aug, then attack when they are in disarray.’

‘I have never known one of the Sixteenth to be in disarray.’

‘Then we shall educate them,’ Meduson replied, before raising his voice to the bridge. ‘Battle stations, all hands!’

Lurking at the edge of augur range, running silent, the *Iron Heart* and its fellow ships of the vanguard began to move. Lurching from engines almost cold to full burn put significant strain on the flagship, the pain of which resonated throughout its hull.

The bridge was still shuddering, awash with crimson light, as the *Iron Heart* and the rest of the vanguard emerged from the radiation well of a dying star field to launch torpedoes.

‘Aug?’ asked Meduson as the missiles streaked into the void, tiny thrusters

blazing.

'The *Unyielding Glory, Ferrum Unbowed* and *Gorgon's Will* have all launched.'

That was Arkul Theld, Jakkus and Lumak.

Across the hololith, a myriad of small markers designated the three torpedo spreads.

The ships segregated from the Sons of Horus flotilla increased power to their shields, the telltale energy flare registering on the *Iron Heart*'s sensors.

'We have their attention, Warleader,' said Mechosa.

Meduson nodded, calculating as the tactical situation evolved before his eyes.

'Enemy fighters inbound,' added the Sorrgol captain.

A swarm of smaller signifiers appeared on the hololith, rushing on an intercept course with the torpedoes.

'Retaliate in kind,' said Meduson, and Mechosa signalled down to the fighter bays.

A second swarm in opposition to the first flashed up on the battlesphere.

Three of the enemy vessels turned to engage the vanguard, moving with glacial slowness. It would take several minutes for the payloads from the Iron Hands ships to reach their targets and the Sons of Horus pushed their engines hard to avoid the torpedoes, not trusting entirely to their inceptors to neutralise them.

The other two, an escort and a destroyer, never deviated course, but drove harder for the retreating *Saurod*.

The *Stormcrow* had already reached engagement range and an exchange of lance fire had begun.

At the coreward-facing head of the flotilla, the other Sons of Horus ships started to adopt defensive postures. At such distance, however, it would take time before they could reach even maximum weapons range.

Meduson knew he needed to exploit that.

'Increase power to engines,' he said calmly. 'Prime main weapon batteries and intensify forward void shield strength. We shall hit these bastards like a damn hammer.'

Orders were heard and obeyed.

Forward laser batteries and lances quickly charged to optimum across the vanguard.

All that they had suffered, the death and the dishonour of scurrying around like whipped dogs, was done.

No more, Meduson vowed. The Iron Tenth would be reborn.

He raised his head, vindicated, vengeful.

‘Open fire.’

Flames gutted the *Cthonic Blood*, rendering its engines inoperable, its main weapons useless and filling the ship with caustic smoke.

Nuros hurried down a narrow corridor, belaboured by the body of a wounded Salamander slung over his back. Blood painted Nuros’ armour, dark and shiny in the cruiser’s emergency lumens. Some of it belonged to him. Most had come from the legionary he carried.

The Sons of Horus had proven hard to kill, despite the Drakes’ numerical advantage. Nuros had expected that. He had not expected such a toll on his own men. Twelve lay dead, left behind in the enginarium. Most of the rest carried injuries, some serious. But the *Cthonic Blood* lay inert in the void thanks to them, and that was not nothing.

Though the ship was crippled, its defenders were not. Vox-horns blared out at every junction, summoning reinforcements. Another stretch of corridor and the boarders would gain the accessway. From there, the gunships and a grateful egress.

Sweat, blood, noise, all coalesced into a confused cacophony of sensory attack and urgent motion for Nuros. The warriors ahead, calling back, unleashing covering fire down every half-dark junction. The ones behind, forming the rearguard or slowing dangerously off the pace. Those by his side, huddled in close formation, low on ammunition, gripping blades slick with transhuman blood. Armour chipped, chainblades missing teeth, retinal lenses cracked like broken windowpanes, the grim realisation of a gorget breach…

Their flight felt like a hurried rout through enemy territory.

Drake…

A voice intruded on Nuros’ thoughts, warring for supremacy with the sawing heaves of his breath.

‘Drake…’ he heard again, still largely oblivious but questioning now whether the voice was his own or if it belonged to someone outside of his head.

‘Nuros!’

A hand on his shoulder confirmed the latter, as did the bloody black figure of Kaylar Norn now standing in his path.

Everything looked red.

Nuros blinked, first to get the blood out of his eyes and again to shut down his armour’s screaming bio-damage alerts.

He felt mildly punch drunk.

‘Apothecary?’

Norn came in close, a sane man trying to convince a mad one of his insanity.

‘He’s dead. Let him go, Nuros.’

They had reached a bulkhead, and had several metres of reinforced adamantium between them and their chasing enemies.

On Nuros’ retinal display, hazed with spasms of static, another icon had turned red. Releasing a laboured breath through his respirator grille, he shrugged the dead Salamander off his back and onto the deck. Blood quickly pooled, not all of it the deceased’s.

Norn knelt by the body as soon as it hit the ground. The chainblade mounted on his wrist began to growl. He punched with his gauntlet, once into the dead warrior’s chest, then into the throat. The reductor did the rest, salvaging the legionary’s progenoids in the hope that one day they would be implanted anew. If any of them lived to see such times again.

‘He that may fight no more, give him peace,’ Norn whispered.

‘Is that it, Raven?’ asked Nuros, impatient to be moving again.

Norn nodded, bitter. ‘I shan’t need the carnifex for this one.’

Then he rose, as cold as death, and on they went.

A blistering hail of lance fire and concussive laser blasts spat out, shots arrowing like comets into the void. Light blazed angry and bright, almost overwhelming the occular sensors of the enemy thousands of kilometres away.

‘Again, another volley,’ said Lumak, his voice a deep basso rumbling inside his war-helm. He seldom removed it any more, the helm as much a part of him as his flesh and his blood and his grief.

It struck him as odd to think of such things, to have such concerns. He was an Iron Hand, of the Clan Avernii, one of the miserable few who remained. Often though, in spite of logic and the coldness of the machines wrought into his body, he believed all he had left to him was grief. And shame. And hate.

It was why he cleaved so to Meduson, a Terran of all things, and a true Gorgon’s son in spite of his provenance.

Ferrus Manus had died. Nothing Lumak could do now would alter that fate. He wished he had died too, but he had lived. That continued existence came with a heavy burden – his profound dishonour.

No, he could not change his primarch’s death, but he could mete out vengeance against those responsible. No deed, however grand – even the execution of Horus himself by Lumak’s own iron hand – could erase his shame, but it would

at least be something. A small measure.

'My lord?' enquired the shipmaster of the *Gorgon's Will*.

Lumak had not realised he had said those last words aloud.

'A small measure of what, sire?'

'Peace?' Lumak replied. 'Atonement? I'm not sure it really matters anymore.'

The shipmaster looked about to answer, but appeared to find he did not have the appropriate response.

'Again,' said Lumak.

The barrage continued.

As the vessels on both sides closed, the exchange of fire between them intensified. So ferocious was the response from the Iron Hands ships that the two enemy vessels chasing down the *Saurod* turned to engage the larger and undamaged cruisers. How long the *Iron Heart* and her fellow ships in the vanguard would remain that way was unknown. An almost constant flare of void shield distortion obscured the oculus now as the Sons of Horus matched their aggressors volley for volley.

Meduson marvelled at their fire discipline and sheer tenacity. Even outgunned, the renegades showed their worth and the reason they were the Warmaster's Legion. Meduson hated them passionately for that most of all.

You should have been the best of us…

His eyes narrowed as he followed the delicate balance of the engagement and saw, at last, a weakness.

'Shields at severely reduced efficacy, my lord,' reported the shipmaster, his brow furrowed as he stooped over the helm. 'We can sustain one, maybe two further volleys before they collapse and we are forced to reinstate.'

'And how long will that take?'

Meduson had fought in several void battles, and though he had developed a keen understanding of its principles, he neither liked it nor grasped all of its subtle nuances.

'Several minutes, sire.'

A smaller but no less vital conflict played out in the closing gulf between the two groups of ships, the entirely more balletic duel between fighter craft. Again, the Iron Hands ships had the larger squadrons but the XVI Legion's pilots proved both wily and tenacious. As a result, torpedoes were proving of little use. At least for the moment.

Meduson grinned ferally, and marked one of the enemy ships.

‘Here,’ he said. ‘The energy signature is lower.’

The shipmaster hurriedly looked to his console, as if only just noticing what the Warleader had identified.

The mortal officer returned Meduson’s grin with one of his own.

‘Shield collapse imminent.’

‘Signal the rest of the vanguard,’ the Warleader said to Mechosa, who had already opened channels and was about to issue the order when the ship’s vox crackled.

Aug paused, staring blindly for a few seconds.

‘A signal,’ he said, frowning.

‘From where does it originate?’ Meduson asked, and felt the Iron Father tense.

‘Not one of ours.’ Aug turned and faced the Warleader, as if needing to in order to convey the truth of his next words. ‘A request for cessation and parlay.’

Meduson scowled. He watched the oculus.

‘Shipmaster?’

The mortal officer had been wiping his still furrowed brow. In fact, his frown had deepened.

‘Enemy vessels are holding position. Weapons are silent.’

‘Cease fire, all stop, but keep the engines warm. Any word from the other Fraters or Mor?’

Aug shook his head. Static still laced the vox between the disparate Iron Hands war parties, blamed on distance and interference from the void.

‘What is the meaning of this?’ asked Mechosa.

‘Is this wise, Warleader?’ said Aug. ‘Their vessels will be able to regroup.’

‘Probably not, but I will not attack an enemy during a ceasefire and they aren’t moving yet,’ he said, and raised his voice to address the shipmaster.

‘Those void shields, shipmaster…’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘They are still depleted according to our instruments?’

‘They are, my lord.’

‘Should that change, unleash everything we’ve got at that ship.’

The shipmaster gave a fierce salute. He cut a ragged but proud figure in his shabby uniform.

‘It will be a genuine pleasure, sire.’

An eerie calm fell upon the bridge, still darkly lit according to battle stations.

All ears awaited the vox.

Aug was first to break the tense silence, exhaling deeply, ruefully.

‘What is it, Frater?’ asked Meduson, correctly interpreting Aug’s mood.

‘I have identified the specific bearer of the signal,’ he said, and then revealed who it was.

Whatever invective had been about to pass Meduson’s lips was stalled as the rough voice of Tybalt Marr issued over the vox.

‘*Meduson… This is a message for the beggar-lord known as Shadrak Meduson*.’

‘How did he know we would be here?’ hissed Mechosa, agitated.

Aug motioned for his silence. The answer to that would have to come later.

Meduson said nothing, watching the hololith but finding no sign of the *Lupercal Pursuivant*. He listened, teeth gritted.

‘*Days have passed. Years will not. So know this, ragged iron son. I have weathered your storm, and I have found you, and I shall have your head just as I promised. This I swear by the Warmaster, and the true Lord of Mankind.*’

The message ended.

‘Enemy ships are entering the void, my lord!’ the shipmaster cried out.

Three additional cruisers intruded at the edge of the oculus, low on the battlesphere, their presence hitherto baffled from the Iron Hand’s augur sweeps. The rest had begun to re-engage weapons and engines, swinging the pendulum back in the renegades’ favour.

‘Is the *Lupercal Pursuivant* amongst them?’

‘No, my lord. Should we retaliate?’

The message restarted, grating from the vox.

Meduson seethed, recognising his mistake, so angry he did not answer immediately. Aug was about to intercede on his behalf when finally he spoke.

‘Kill them. Kill that damn ship.’

The barrage recommenced and the gulf was filled again with light and fury. One of the Sons of Horus frigates exploded, scattering debris across the void, the ruptures of its death short-lived but explosive. The fire of its destruction died quickly, starved of sustenance, but it ravaged the ship’s innards before it expired. Chunks of the disintegrating vessel collided against the shields of larger cruisers, and were annihilated on impact.

As the return barrages began to hit the *Iron Heart’*s shields, Meduson recognised it for what it was, a petty victory.

Three more Sons of Horus ships had joined the fray, large and imposing, unharmed and with weapons ablaze. The entire phalanx had begun to turn, slowly angling its more numerous and destructive broadsides to bear. The

Saurod and *Stormcrow* had been forgotten. One could do little but shrink away from the fight, bruised and bleeding beyond its capacity to easily shrug off; the other had disengaged, recognising the futility of an attack against a reinforced and re-prepared enemy.

And to the coreward side, burning hard from a starboard aspect, high on the battlesphere, the rest of the flotilla was coming.

'Second signal,' ordered Meduson. With the Fraters' ships they could still wring out a costly victory.

Mechosa tried, then shook his head.

'Still nothing?' said Meduson.

'No response. The enemy could be impeding vox.'

'Shields are at less than ten per cent, my lord,' announced the shipmaster.

Alert sirens sounded, droning and insistent.

On the oculus, the *Unyielding Glory* suffered a sudden shield failure and took a fearsome hit. Arkul Theld's voice came across the vox, strained, smothered by screaming klaxons.

'*We are hit, we are hit,*' he said. '*Shields are do–*'

Static took the rest of his words.

'Have we lost the *Unyielding Glory?*' Meduson demanded, frustrated at the sudden turn from supremacy to confusion.

'It flies still,' said Aug. He had closed his eyes and spoke as if he stood upon the ship himself. 'The bridge is badly damaged. Theld… I don't know. Emergency stations are in effect. They are withdrawing to defensive postures.'

He blinked, and returned to the *Iron Heart*.

'Forward shields almost depleted, my lord,' cried the shipmaster, fighting against the alert sirens.

'Slow engines, turn hard to port,' ordered Meduson. 'We'll show them our flank and roll out the broadsides.' He turned to the Sorrgol captain by his side. 'And Mechosa, get those damn Fraters to engage or we'll be debris by the time they deign to act.'

Hidden by floating debris and lost in the deadly fire exchange, a small ship emerged into the void, a minnow amongst leviathans. It literally *appeared* as if from the ether, yet emerged not from the warp – for no ship that size could survive such a place without a Geller field – but rather from somewhere else entirely.

ELEVEN

The Unbound Flame, rekindled

Nuros pressed a hand to his side. Something dark and thick leaked through his armoured fingers, his efforts at staunching the flow of blood ineffective. He didn't remember taking the hit, but then the skirmish in the *Cthonic Blood'*s enginarium defied cogency in its freneticism. It had cut him deeply, he knew that much. His body would compensate, his blood would clot and his wounds seal, but none of that would matter if they were blasted out of the void.

The three gunships, fire-blackened, engines roaring, catapulted out of the tear in the *Cthonic Blood'*s flank and ran almost immediately into a debris field.

Still groggy from his wounds, vaguely aware of his hand being taken from his side and Kaylar Norn stepping in, Nuros barely felt the sudden lurch as the ship dived sharply. He scarcely appreciated the rapid bank to port or the abrupt jerk to starboard, a zagging trajectory intended to stave off an ignominious void death for everyone aboard.

'Pilot…' said Nuros, breathy, nodding to his Apothecary as the pain began to ease. 'The other ships?'

A pause as the gunship lurched again, the shriek of its engines like white noise inside the hold, then the pilot replied.

'*We are still three, captain… No, wait… Four!*'

Even Norn paused in his silent ministrations to lift his head.

'Enemy?' asked Nuros, his voice a half-growl. Subconsciously, he tightened the grip on his sword.

Another pause, preceding another deft manoeuvre. They yawed hard to port. Norn cursed. Las-beams stitched across the viewslits.

'I think Brother Otath seeks to test you, Raven,' said Nuros, glancing at the

Apothecary, his humour returning with his health. ‘The ship?’ he pressed, asking the pilot again.

‘*Is friendly…*’ came the reply at last. ‘*Salamanders, captain. It is Eighteenth Legion, Salamanders. The* Vulcanis.’

‘Where did it come from?’

‘*Apparently from nowhere, captain. I had nothing on sensors and then it was there.*’

Nuros said to Norn. ‘The warp?’

The Apothecary considered it but shook his head. ‘Not possible.’

‘Then from where?’

‘*Captain,*’ the voice of the pilot intruded.

‘Speak, Otath.’

‘*Incoming vox from the gunship.*’

‘Put it through.’

Otath jacked up the return, so those in the hold could hear it over the clamour.

‘*This is Igen Gargo, pilot of the Thunderhawk* Vulcanis*. We need aid, brothers. Our vessel is damaged. We have the Unbound Flame. I say again, we have the Unbound Flame.*’

Nuros stopped. He stopped moving, he stopped breathing; even his thoughts ground to stasis.

‘Nuros,’ said Norn urgently, noticing the same sudden reaction among every Salamander in the hold capable of hearing the vox. ‘What is the Unbound Flame?’

Otath had already ramped the engines to maximum as they speared for the ship identifying itself as the *Vulcanis*.

‘It is the primarch…’ Nuros breathed. ‘Vulkan lives.’

The *Iron Heart* burned. Fire suppression servitors roved the bridge, tireless as the ship trembled against the enemy’s barrage.

Meduson and the other legionaries had mag-locked their boots to the command dais. The mortal crew had no such facility and clung to consoles or shuddering guide rails as they staggered across the deck.

The tactical hololith flickered, went down and then stuttered back into life again. A bank of cogitators exploded, throwing uniformed men and women backwards. A servitor lurched from its alcove to retrieve the bodies. Sparks cascaded from the ceiling. The fire was contained. The battery continued.

‘Shipmaster,’ growled Meduson, a long cut down his forehead crafting a jagged

red tributary.

The shipmaster lived, but held his left arm close to his body, the limb broken.

‘Portside shields are failing, lord.’

‘How far out are their reinforcements?’

‘Within weapons range in minutes, lord.’

‘Aug,’ said Meduson, absorbing the scene of carnage playing out across the oculus. Ships on both sides had been badly gouged. Streams of fuel and other fluids hung in the void like a slick. Cold detonations bloomed, silent, deadly. Void distortion raged across both fleets like heavy static.

A carefully and meticulously planned raid had turned into an attritional slugfest.

Meduson cursed finding the plans. He recognised them for a trap, a poisoned feast from Marr that he had gladly accepted. Now he was choking on it.

‘Aug,’ Meduson repeated, firmer, louder.

‘I have contact,’ Aug replied, as a voice cut through a deluge of vox interference.

‘*Red Talon engaging*,’ said Autek Mor, his fearsome timbre unmistakable.

‘The other Fraters?’ asked Aug, not waiting for Meduson, having adjudged that speed preceded protocol.

‘*Are engaging at my order.*’

Mechosa shared a worried glance with Meduson, but the Warleader nodded.

Aug gave second signal.

‘*Confirmed*,’ said Mor in a deathly rasp befitting his grim reputation.

The vox cut off as Mor ended the exchange.

A second fleet of Iron Hands vessels appeared at the edge of the hololith. They had stalked the Sons of Horus ships at the coreward edge of the flotilla and now that the enemy had turned were free to bombard their rear aspects.

Two enemy ships died swiftly, scythed apart and then sundered by reactor overloads. Twin supernovas blazed magnesium-bright, lighting up the void in an ephemeral nuclear sunrise.

The *Red Talon*, surging aggressively at the fore of the chasing ships, killed them both.

Meduson could imagine Mor carving a mental tally mark for each one, but was glad to be the beneficiary of the Iron Father’s wrath rather than its recipient.

The *Iron Heart* weathered the next barrage, and the next.

With Mor as their brutal killing edge, the other Fraters had little to do but threaten and apply the finishing blow to already crippled ships. It was enough.

Even with their reinforcements, the Sons of Horus disengaged. Several ships

stayed behind to secure the escape of the others, and were badly punished for their heroism. It left a bad taste in Meduson's mouth, even though he knew this was how it had to end.

Mor wanted to pursue, and even voxed his intentions, but both the *Saurod* and *Unyielding Glory* were badly bleeding. No ship of the Iron Hands vanguard had come away unscathed, and without the other Fraters, who had no appetite for sadism, Mor would have traded an advantageous position for a disadvantageous one. And so he relented, prowling at the edge of the battered Iron Hands fleet instead.

On the bridge of the *Iron Heart*, the klaxons screamed on even as the crew slumped into grateful silence.

They had survived. They had won, but it was not the manner of victory that Meduson had wanted.

Several enemy ships drifted inert, a few thousand kilometres away. Their wounds polluted the void, bleeding bodies and micro-wreckage.

'Shall I send in boarding parties, Warleader?' Mechosa asked after the warning klaxons had been silenced by Aug. 'That many supply ships…'

His words died on his lips as he made eye contact with Aug.

'They are empty, brother,' said the Frater, his mood downcast. 'Marr will have seen to it.'

'A reconnoitring of the stricken vessels might yet yield–'

'No,' said Meduson, flatly. 'That's what he wants, for us to bleed ourselves white fighting his murder-gangs and kill-squads. Make no mistake, captain, his ravenous dogs are aboard those ships. I'll not make further sacrifice by committing men to them. Arm vortex torpedoes, every ship in the vanguard. I want nothing left. Not even atoms.'

Meduson stalked from the bridge as Mechosa took command and relayed the order.

'Warleader,' Aug began. 'Shadrak.'

Meduson paused as he reached the blast doors that led off the bridge.

'It was a good victory,' said Aug. 'Hard fought, but good.'

'The first of many,' Meduson said after a moment and then carried on.

TWELVE

Reckonings, of Drakes and Gorgons

Meduson had stripped out of his armour and stood naked in an ablutions cell, letting the steam scour his skin.

Scars ran the length of his body, their reflection in the glass like some grim and frenzied topography. They mapped his deeds and conquests, and Meduson knew every ugly one of them. He emerged after several hours, his skin red and aglow, a fine veneer of water vapour dappling both flesh and metal.

He donned robes and padded barefoot across the cold floor. His armour stood before him, black and as badly scarred as its wearer, mounted on a simple armature.

Meduson left the ablutions chamber, passing through a heat field that instantly dried his skin and then an archway into his quarters. The strategium table remained as he had left it, the data-slates and maps still upon it somehow mocking.

He cursed his own pride for believing the 'gift' he had found on Hamart. The other Fraters would think it foolish too. An audience with them and a renewed debate as to the next course of action would not be far off. After they had licked their wounds, what precious few they had sustained, they would issue a summons. That was fine; Meduson had his own questions for them. For now, the fleet had scattered again, running in the shadows like nothing had changed.

Except it had.

They had fought the Sons of Horus and won. Hard fought, just as Aug had said, but they had still won. Not a raid or a hit-and-run ambush – an attack, a battle.

'He was trying to kill you again,' said a familiar voice. Meduson had forgotten he had left the door to his quarters open.

‘You realise that, of course,’ said Aug. ‘And he failed. Again.’

‘I do,’ said Meduson, and began gathering up the war plans on his strategium table.

‘I don’t think he cares how it happens, either. Only that there’s a body and it’s yours. This is dangerous, Shadrak, and not just for you.’

Meduson paused his mindless chore.

‘You refer to the Legion?’

‘Not a Legion, not yet, but the nascent possibility of one. Pride will see it undone.’

Meduson turned to face him.

‘You mean my pride, specifically. You recall we won, Aug?’

Aug shook his head, rueful. ‘Tybalt Marr is a thorn in all of our sides, but he has marked you for especial attention. I worry that your growing obsession with him, and his with you, could undo what we are striving so hard to achieve – to weld back together a Legion, for us to bring purpose and meaning back to the Iron Tenth.’

‘What is it you think I have been doing all of these months, Aug?’ said Meduson, exasperated. ‘Every raid, every sabotage – it is to draw him out. He *hunts* us. Can you not see that? Marr is only bent on my destruction because he knows it will signal the end of all this. Without me, there is no Legion. We have won a great victory, but it isn’t over.’

Aug frowned, taken aback by the Warleader’s words. ‘Is that what you truly believe? You told me you did not want this. That you would serve only because others would not. This is precisely what worries me.’

‘It has not changed. I am resolved as I ever was to discard the mantle of Warleader when stability returns to the Legion and a better candidate can be found. Or do you think Autek Mor a worthy replacement?’

‘Of course not,’ replied Aug, scowling at the very idea. ‘But Marr is under your skin, brother.’

‘And the flesh is weak, I suppose.’

‘You turn our credo against us very easily, Shadrak.’

Meduson exhaled his frustration and vented what remained of his anger.

‘I’m sorry, Jebez. I do not mean to. You say I have changed. I have. I see a future for us, for the Iron Tenth, that does not end in isolation and secession from the Imperium. I believe I can bring that future about. I believe *only* I can do it, but not alone. I need allies in this.’

‘You have them, but don’t squander their fealty in a vainglorious quest to kill

Tybalt Marr.'

'It will come to a reckoning, Aug. Him or us.'

Aug nodded sadly.

'Perhaps it will,' he said, before changing subject. 'Gorgonson has readied casualty reports for the *Iron Heart*. The rest of the vessels in the fleet are trickling in more numbers. Arkul Theld is dead.'

'I see,' said Meduson, grim. He had liked the old captain. Moreover, Theld had been one of his staunchest supporters. It weakened his position and would make what came next even harder. Even off the back of a victory. 'Does the *Unyielding Glory* have a replacement officer?'

'A veteran sergeant, Clan Ungavaar.'

'And so we continue to erode. Who is the Iron Father on that ship?'

'Gaeln Krenn, an adherent of the late Aan Kolver.'

'Perfect,' said Meduson with acidic sarcasm, weighing up what the consequences of that would be. A low-ranking officer would almost certainly defer to his Iron Father on matters of clan politics, and Krenn would be of a similar mind to Rawt, Kernag and the others.

'I need to meet with them,' said Meduson, decided.

'The Fraters?'

'Them first. Then everyone.'

Aug nodded. 'Very well. I'll take the appropriate steps.'

'Thank you, Aug. You are my Hand Elect.'

'I am whatever you need me to be, Warleader,' said Aug, and left.

The door ground shut in his wake, it, like so much else in this alliance, feeling the strain.

Meduson began to don his armour, first dragging the bodyglove over his weary flesh. Over the last few months, he had become quite adept at the process, having had to learn to do it himself. Armouring serfs were in short supply. Everything was in short supply. Gorgonson had occasionally assisted, but the Apothecary had more important duties to attend to and would only remind Meduson of their recent losses. He could at least stave that off for a short while.

Sitting down on a stool to attach his boots and greaves, he raised Mechosa on the vox. He needed to gather the council again, and plan the next engagement. The data from Hamart had proven costly, but it had not been false. Perhaps there was yet a way to utilise it.

'*Warleader*, *Nuros has returned*,' Mechosa began before he could speak, uncharacteristically animated.

‘And?’ asked Meduson, realising there must be more.

‘*He is not alone, Warleader.*’

‘You are being unusually unforthcoming, captain.’

‘*I apologise, Warleader, but you must see this yourself. He awaits in aft docking bay sigma-eight.*’

‘The docking bay?’

‘*Yes. We all do.*’

Meduson looked down at the scattered pieces of war-plate and the half armour left on the armature, looking like an unfinished statue.

Gorgonson’s assistance would have been greatly appreciated in that moment.

‘I am adept, but not miraculous…’ he muttered.

‘*Warleader?*’ asked Mechosa, evidently having overheard.

‘I’m on my way.’

Sighing, Meduson took his cuirass, affixed it as quickly as he could and left the rest behind.

A crowd had gathered in the docking bay, large enough that as the blast doors opened Meduson met the armoured back and shoulders of a fellow Iron Hands legionary.

‘What is the meaning of this?’

The cavernous chamber, usually only the haunt of the spartan maintenance crews at large on the *Iron Heart,* had become thronged with legionaries, deckhands and what few armsmen the ship still retained. Only the servitors continued about their duties, although even they were hampered by the masses.

The Iron Hand standing sentry turned.

‘Warleader,’ he said, deferential but with the same tremor of excitement in his voice that had affected Mechosa. ‘It is beyond all hope.’

Meduson tried to look past the huddled bodies mildly jostling with each other to catch a glimpse of something close to the intake ramps. He noticed a pair of gunships, both drake-green and battle-scarred, and assumed they belonged to Nuros.

‘Where is Nuros?’ he asked.

The sentry pointed towards the heart of the crowd. ‘With *him*. They all are.’

Meduson scowled, and began to push through the bodies. They yielded easily enough, most were mortal after all, but Meduson could only see as far as a ring of black-armoured Iron Hands who surrounded something or someone.

At last, Lumak put his head up and Meduson caught his eye. The Clan Avernii

captain bulled a path, and urged Meduson on with great sweeping gestures of his arms.

'Stand aside,' he bellowed, and the mortals scattered, though only reluctantly. 'Stand aside for the Warleader!'

Meduson met him halfway, surprised when Lumak clasped his forearm in a firm lock.

'Brother?' ventured Meduson. Out of his full armour, he looked slighter than the burly Avernii. 'What is happening here? Why are so many gathered?'

'Follow me,' Lumak said, releasing his grip and forging a way through. As they reached the outer ring of Iron Hands, the guards parted and Meduson saw what everyone was striving to get a glimpse of.

'They come to witness a miracle,' said Lumak, and though those words sounded ludicrous coming out of the veteran's mouth, Meduson believed them.

Nuros was here. So too were his brothers. Each of them knelt, heads bowed, the solemn oaths of their volcanic home world murmuring on their lips. Only three of the Drakes had stayed on their feet. Meduson didn't recognise them.

As he entered the circle, the reek of ash and cinder struck him like a fist. It was heady, but he couldn't decide if it was that or the one to whom the Drakes paid homage which caused his hearts to quicken.

Eyes, red as burning calderas, regarded him. A face like sculpted onyx and carrying the wisdom of ages gave a knowing smile. He rose, this titan, he of the fiery gaze and the statuesque features. A blacksmith's son, so the legend said, an immortal so the rumours had it.

Never had Meduson felt so inadequate, reminded painfully of his half armour and hurried appearance.

'Primarch…' he uttered, barely forming the word. It hurt his neck to crane it so much. At least he could meet the figure's gaze, even if he could not hold it. How could he hope to with those infernos boring into him, judging, measuring as only one such as he ever could.

'Warleader,' came the reply, a voice almost chasmal in its depth, practically resonant.

Meduson blinked for the first time in several minutes. He could scarcely believe his own words even as they left his mouth.

'Vulkan… You're alive.'

Meduson had not yet dressed, not fully. He sat in half armour, more dishevelled than imperious. Still, it was that or ask the primarch to wait.

Vulkan sat opposite, his posthuman stature eclipsing that of the partially plated Warleader. He looked around.

'What is this place?' he asked, his voice deeper and even more resonant in the echoing chamber.

'A former triumph hall, now given over to a strategium. I thought it appropriate.'

Statues stood at arms along both walls of the musty chamber, describing champions of the Legion and ancient Medusa. Banners hung from the ceiling, a little threadbare, dust motes cascading from old fabric as they bowed to the pressure of the air recyclers.

Meduson had reverently moved a few of the statues, the lighter ones, to make room for star charts, route maps and ship schemata. Half-empty ammunition crates sat in well-raided stacks in the corners, belt feeds, bullets and bolt shells. Promethium tanks nestled alongside. Some of the larger, reinforced crates had served as stools, judging by their scuffed appearance and overall positioning relative to the strategium table.

Vulkan's eyes lingered on the statues, the grimness of each stony countenance, half hidden in shadow, apparently beguiling.

'I knew them,' he said, his tone slightly melancholic. 'Some of them. It was early in the Crusade. A different age it feels like now.'

Meduson held his tongue, unsure what he could possibly say that wouldn't sound facile or trite.

Overhead, a yellow lumen strip flickered and Vulkan looked up.

'Unreinforced, battered, bleeding and despite all that you persist,' he said, returning his gaze to the Warleader. 'Impressive. I knew my brother had tenacious sons, but I had not appreciated just how tenacious.'

'We have all suffered, and yet still endure,' replied Meduson. 'Does that mean you will join us then?'

Meduson had explained in some detail both his military goals and his desires for the reconstitution of the Iron Tenth. Not only did the former triumph hall provide solace from the crew and the other legionaries on board, it had also allowed Meduson to better describe his war plans. He had left out Tybalt Marr, but did mention the victories he had achieved against the Sons of Horus and how this had rattled the Legion to such an extent that resources were being divided to counter the perceived threat to the Warmaster's crusade.

He had then expressed how having a primarch at the head of his armies would mean the Iron Tenth and the survivors of both the XVIII and XIX Legions would

finally have what they had lacked for so long: true and unimpeachable leadership. With Vulkan by his side, even the Iron Fathers would not resist him. They could reclaim what they had lost and return to the war with honour and pride.

'I cannot,' said Vulkan, hollowing out Meduson's hopes with those two simple words.

Meduson found he currently lacked the ability to utter even one.

'Do not misunderstand me, Shadrak, your deeds are worthy, your plan is worthy.'

'Then,' Meduson interrupted, finding his voice at last, 'what stops you?'

'We have a different purpose, my Draaksward and I,' said Vulkan. 'One that cannot be swallowed by endless war.'

Meduson looked over at the drakescale-clad warriors, who had yet to leave the primarch's side. They remained close even now, not so that they intruded or were even particularly noticeable but near enough to act if the need arose. Meduson did not blame them. All three of the Legions sundered at Isstvan had grown wary of betrayal, and guarded against it even in the most ostensibly secure circumstances.

Meduson had eschewed a retinue. The *Iron Heart* was his ship after all, garrisoned by his warriors. He had no cause for concern here. Besides, to bring either Aug or Lumak and Mechosa, or even Nuros and Dalcoth would have made his meeting more like a debate of terms between two rival kings than a discourse between allies. He had no doubt Nuros wished desperately to be present, and perhaps the others too, but he needed to gauge Vulkan's intent first. Alas, it seemed contrary to the one Meduson hoped he would adopt.

'I laud your victory, but I cannot join a crusade. What I go to do is of the utmost importance, so know that I do not refuse you lightly or without good reason.' Vulkan absently touched the amulet around his neck, and Meduson wondered at the significance of the gesture.

'Is it as vital as attacking the Legion of Horus, the bastard traitor who saw his kith and kin lain dead in a grave on Isstvan?' he said, letting his frustration get the better of him.

Vulkan grew stern and the embers of his eyes flared, made fiery in the half-light.

'Be careful, Shadrak. That is my brother you speak ill of.'

Meduson became instantly contrite. 'I apologise, lord primarch. I am tired – the war for us has been most taxing.'

‘And I have been slain, repeatedly, and driven half-mad by one of my sadistic brothers.’

‘Suddenly my pains feel rather inadequate,’ Meduson conceded, shrugging.

Vulkan laughed, a thunderous sound that filled the hall like the beating of heavy drums. The echo had not yet abated as he smiled warmly at the Warleader, every inch the Nocturnean tribal king.

‘I like you, Shadrak. You are a fine warrior and a strong leader. You do my slain brother great honour,’ Vulkan said, growing solemn.

Up close, Meduson could see the symbolic whorls of fire and the sigils of serpentine beasts branded into his skin.

‘Then join me, Vulkan, and let us avenge the Gorgon together.’

‘Know it is not will that I lack. I ache to wreak vengeance against the one who killed my brother, my sons, *your* brothers. It is an endless litany of retribution, but an even greater task binds me, one that would see my sons and I reach the Throneworld.’

‘Terra? How?’ asked Meduson, trying to hide his disbelief.

‘Old paths, not readily known to men.’

‘Then let my warriors and I escort you. It would be an honour.’

‘The honour would be mine, Shadrak, but I cannot accede to that either.’

‘You refuse to aid me and yet also refuse my aid,’ said Meduson, and raised one eyebrow in mock offence. ‘It is difficult not to feel insulted.’

‘Terra cannot be reached by any army save one, and you know of whose army I speak. If I am to reach the Throneworld then it will be alone, barring the three you see among us in this room.’

‘The Draaksward.’

Vulkan nodded.

‘It is an old term. I find comfort in tradition.’

‘And you have a way to reach Terra, you and your retinue?’

Again, Vulkan nodded.

‘The old path – its ways are secret and byzantine. I am not entirely certain of them myself, but I know it is the *only* way to reach the Throneworld and my father.’

Meduson briefly dipped his head at the mention of the Emperor.

‘And so what is it I can do for you, if not get you to Terra?’

‘Repair *Vulcanis,* our ship?’

‘We have little to spare, but of course.’

‘And then get us back to our path.’

‘If it is in my power, yes. What drove you from it?’

‘A path such as this is not conventionally trodden.’

‘I won’t pretend to understand what that means,’ answered Meduson, honestly, ‘but I swear to help you, and do all I can.’

Vulkan slowly bowed his head in a gesture of gratitude and respect.

Meduson had been about to rise, deciding it was high time he donned the proper panoply, when Aug’s voice crackled in his ear.

‘*I have the Fraters,*’ he said.

‘Including Mor?’

‘*No. Autek Mor has gone.*’

Meduson frowned. ‘Gone where?’

‘*The* Red Talon *and the other vessels he commands are no longer with us, it would seem.*’

‘Then I’ll speak to the ones we do still have, lest our alliance deteriorates further.’

Aug ended the vox-link, returning Meduson’s attention to the primarch.

‘I have some business I need to see to, if you would excuse me.’

‘A Warleader’s task is without end,’ Vulkan replied. ‘I would stay, if you would allow it. Perhaps there is insight I can offer?’

Meduson bowed his head, humbled.

‘I would be honoured, primarch.’

The hololiths flickered sporadically as before, though Meduson had chosen to receive his incorporeal guests in the former triumph hall rather than on the bridge this time.

Kuleg Rawt and the others looked severe across the shaky projection, clad in full battleplate and helms.

Rawt gripped the haft of his power axe tightly.

‘*Hail, Meduson,*’ he said, dour. ‘*A great victory has been won.*’

The four saluted as one, thumping their fists against their chests.

‘What happened to Mor?’ asked Meduson, surprised by the show of fealty.

‘*He has gone, Warleader,*’ said Kernag.

‘I know that much already. His ships would have been useful. You were with him. What happened?’ he asked again.

‘*He fought, then left for further conquest,*’ replied Naduul Norsson, snide and bitter as ever.

‘*Autek Mor is a blight,*’ uttered Raask Arkborne. His malfunctioning bionic eye

shuttered and then opened, as if agitated. '*And his leaving is welcome.*'

'His ships are welcome, his blood and sweat is welcome,' said Meduson, and saw the unease the reference to the flesh provoked in the hololithic assembly. 'If not for him, perhaps it would be defeat not victory we now taste. What delayed your intervention during the battle? Could you not see the engagement had changed?'

'*You ordered us to await second signal, Warleader,*' said Kernag, and the suggestion of slighted pride in his voice heated Meduson's blood.

'And yet it appeared as if your reluctance to commit to battle swayed your better judgement.'

'*Useful for what?*' asked Rawt.

'Frater?' asked Meduson, not quite following.

'*You said Mor's ships would have been useful. For what, Warleader?*'

'For the next battle. What else is there, after all? We still have several other patrol routes to attack. Tybalt Marr can't be watching them all.'

'*Is that wise?*' asked Rawt, unable to hide his surprise, or perhaps unwilling to try. Meduson sensed in him a desire to challenge for leadership.

'It is our only course if we are to move forward. We have to grow in strength, find more allies. Hiding gains us neither.'

'*Hence, another gathering,*' said Kernag, evidently referring to the summons made by Aug.

'*Our risk of annihilation increasing with each one,*' said Arkborne, his arm twitching in sympathetic irritation.

'Versus obsolescence, I would risk anything,' Meduson declared. 'I must know if you are with me on this, with the Legion.'

'*We serve the Gorgon's will,*' said Arkborne, and Meduson frowned.

'Meaning what?'

'*We follow his orders, and his alone.*'

'Are you speaking figuratively, Raask?'

'*He* is *the Legion*. *The Gorgon speaks for us now.*'

Meduson knew that of all the Fraters Clan Felg's had suffered the most. His injuries, sustained over the Crusade and afterwards, had left him less than a man, and the parts of him that were machine were in need of vital repair.

'Kuleg?' Meduson was asking Rawt if his fellow Frater had lost grip of his mind as well as his body.

'*Three days, Aug told us,*' Rawt replied, avoiding the unasked question. If he felt any unease at what had just transpired his helmet hid it from the Warleader.

‘Three days. A safe haven will be transmitted via fresh encryption,’ said Meduson, choosing not to press the point.

Rawt nodded. They all did, and the hololiths flickered out.

Meduson turned, the triumph hall dark again in the absence of the dimly lit projections.

Vulkan did not move, but his eyes blazed. He did not speak either, but Meduson knew he had heard what Arkborne had said.

The Gorgon speaks for us now.

He needed to consult his council, and possibly Aug too. The Hand Elect might have some insight, and their last meeting had left Meduson slightly disquieted. The Warleader took his leave, informing Vulkan one of his warriors would be along presently to take him and his sons to quarters aboard ship.

Vulkan still said nothing. He nodded to show he had heard and understood, his fists clenched.

A barrack room served as quarters for the Drakes. Spartan in decoration, it nonetheless had several berths, an ablutions chamber and an armoury where weapons could be tended, stripped and reassembled as needed.

Gargo tinkered with the spear he had taken from the jetbike back on Nocturne. He had determined to shorten the haft and give the tip a sharper edge. Experimenting with the power feed, he sent a jolt of energy into the blade and frowned.

‘Weak disruptor field,’ he muttered. ‘A pity there is no forge at hand.’

‘This ship has forges aplenty, I have no doubt,’ said Zytos. He stood staring at the seared impression of a gauntleted fist rendered in white against the soot-black metal wall.

‘Then it is a pity one has not been made available to us.’ Gargo flexed his bionic, the cruder one, and rotated the arm in the shoulder cuff. It whirred, irritated, recalcitrant. ‘This needs fixing too,’ he muttered, finding it difficult to straighten the limb.

Zytos had not stopped staring at the symbol.

‘He said, “The Gorgon speaks for us now”. Those were the Iron Hand’s exact words.’

‘Perhaps he spoke figuratively?’ suggested Gargo.

Zytos dismissed the idea with a sharp shake of the head.

‘The Iron Tenth are plain-speaking. I have rarely heard them talk figuratively, Igen.’

Abidemi nodded. He was sitting on one of the reinforced berths and rubbing oil onto his sword's blade and teeth. Not that it needed it. Nothing he had yet encountered could dull its edge, but he kept to his warrior's habits regardless.

'I heard it too, but assumed I misunderstood his meaning. It is curious though, brothers. It cannot be so. Ferrus Manus is dead. I saw him fall,' he said, his voice fading as if with the painful memory, 'although I was far away.'

Many of the legionaries at Isstvan, both betrayers and betrayed, had seen it. Until that day, the primarchs had all been immortals. Unkillable. Gods, although no such beings supposedly existed, the very concept vehemently denied. The Phoenician had proven the point. Fulgrim, standing over his beloved brother, his blade raised like an executioner's axe. The Gorgon on his knees, surrounded by a sea of his dead sons, all of whom had failed him. Bloodied, broken, his impotent rage all but spent.

The death blow had cut head from neck in one decisive blow.

What followed reignited a belief in the deific when it came to the matter of the Emperor's sons.

'I *felt* it, I think,' Abidemi said. 'The Gorgon's death.'

Gargo set down the spear.

'A hollowing storm,' he said.

'And then… absence,' Zytos concluded, his eyes still on the symbol. 'There is disharmony here, and it began with the Gorgon's end.'

'Never has iron been so fragile,' Abidemi agreed, the oiled leather in his hand forgotten.

'Do you know him, brother,' asked Gargo of Zytos, 'this Meduson?'

Zytos shook his head.

'I have fought alongside the Iron Hands before, during the Great Crusade and after, but never that one. Numeon did, I think, on Caldera but it was one of many conquests.'

'They call him Warleader,' said Abidemi.

'And what of Nuros?' asked Gargo. 'I know his name from the muster rolls but that is the extent of my knowledge.'

Nuros had said little during the rescue. He had come swiftly though, demonstrating the self-sacrifice and determination for which the Salamanders were justly proud. His reaction and that of his warriors to Vulkan's appearance had been close to worship.

'I sense questions in him,' said Abidemi.

'Were we any different on Macragge and then afterwards back on Nocturne?'

said Zytos.

'I still have a great many questions,' murmured Gargo, but kept his voice low.

Zytos glanced over to the only silent figure in the expansive barrack room, and thought he had questions too. They all did.

Vulkan sat apart from the others, eyes closed in contemplative silence, one hand resting on the curious talisman he wore.

'Father?' said Zytos as Vulkan opened his eyes, though whether in response to Zytos' attention or something else was unclear.

'I thought my brother dead,' said Vulkan, gazing into shadows, his mind faraway.

Vulkan remembered the cadaverous apparition that had haunted him in Konrad's dungeon, the spectre of his long-dead brother that had tried to drive him mad.

That ghost of Ferrus Manus had returned to him now, a spectre ever-present since he had heard the words of the Iron Father spoken into Meduson's hall.

The Gorgon speaks for us now.

Each of the primarchs had been bestowed gifts by their father, their creator. *He* had made them all unique. Why should it just be Vulkan given immortality? Could Ferrus not also be beyond death? But he had been hacked apart, his flesh sundered and degraded, his head taken. Nothing remained. But then had Vulkan's flesh not been burned to ash, his body frozen, his innards eviscerated, his skin flayed, his bones crushed… Even the heart of Deathfire could not destroy him.

He had no wish to be part of Meduson's crusade. The Iron Tenth were on their own. But he could not leave, not yet. He had sworn to himself not to be dissuaded from his task. It would be so easy to return to the war. The temptation had grown powerful. He could not get embroiled in Meduson's struggle, but this could not be ignored. Ferrus Manus was dead. He had died on Isstvan, so why then did he still haunt Vulkan's thoughts?

Out of the corner of his eye, Vulkan thought he saw him. *Him*. As cold and gaunt as he had been then, skeletal and wasted, and feared he could be losing his sanity all over again. He shut his eyes, willing the revenant away and when he opened them again the Gorgon was gone. He might never have been there at all. And yet…

Vulkan rose to his feet.

'I must know.'

THIRTEEN

The first strand, severed

Hot air, thick with petrochem fumes, choked the night. The manufactorums, the teeming bullet farms, the tank yards, the armouries, all toiled without cease. Quotas were met, then increased. Plumes of black, greasy smoke unspooled into the atmosphere from immense soot-stained chimney stacks. Industry ground on, relentless, desperate. Orbital craft arrived daily, their adamantium and battle-scarred bellies hungry for tithes of men and materiel.

Entire hive cities of millions had been put to use, churning out ammunition, weapons, shells and armour, enslaved to a war with an appetite beyond satiation.

Cartur Umenedies had to stop to catch his breath, leaning on the corner of an abandoned watch station in lower-quadrant Tartus. Here the streets ran close and in warrens. Though lower-quadrant Tartus boasted over fifty thousand souls, crammed in a habitation grid fit for half that number, Cartur was alone.

The war, he knew, had made hermits of them all. Where once these wretched streets would have been overrun with the dregs of humankind – the hawkers, the crude-vendors, the night-women, the pushers, the low-guilders, the siphoners, the lampmen, the pit-kings and the sump warders – now not a soul stirred. Vendors closed early, if they opened at all; businesses not dedicated entirely to the war had shut down. Even the pleasure dens were boarded up and silent.

Horus was coming, so the wind said, and the wind reeked of oil and death.

Cartur glanced behind him, but couldn't see his pursuer any more. He wasn't entirely sure he had seen it the first time but he knew someone was after him. He had *felt* it, and he had learned in his inordinately long life to trust his feelings.

He looked up, hoping to catch a glimpse of the sky and reaffirm his bearings. It had been a long time since he had come this low, hoping now the obscurity of

the place would keep him safe.

Through parting clouds of greasy smog, he caught a glimpse of an ugly cadaver-yellow sky. He saw flags too.

Banners still flew from the higher spires professing allegiance to Terra and the Throne. The slogans in the lower sinks, the truly foetid underbelly, were less defiant. They prophesied an ending, a cessation of all things and a slow degeneration into despair.

From this angle, it was easier to guess which side might have the right of it.

Heart hammering, his rebreather mask almost spent, Cartur hurried on. He checked his sidearm first, the ammo gauge flashing green, reassuring him he had a maxed-out clip and another round ready in the breech.

He was running again when he flipped a hexagonal orientation-lens over his right eye to review the lower-quadrant Tartus map schematic.

'Nearly there,' he gasped, and baulked at how terrified his voice sounded, and how much it echoed.

He took the tightest alleyways, the most circuitous route, and was beginning to think he might have escaped when he heard the thud of heavy boots. The dirty, mechanised growl of armour servos carried on the throbbing air.

Cartur risked another glance behind him, but failed to see the shadow skipping across the rooftops giving chase. He felt it though, a monstrous psychic presence that eclipsed Cartur's meagre abilities.

There were two of them.

The other one, the hound he had come to think of him as, for he was tenacious and bled brutality like sweat from his pores, followed more overtly but the night was dark and the hound still far enough away that Cartur could not see him either. The mind of the hound felt very different. It hurt behind the eyes to try to touch it, a pain that grew to nausea-inducing agony when Cartur had tried to delve deeper into its subconscious, where he might extend some subtle influence.

He had always been gifted, he knew this even as a child. It manifested as a kind of profound luck, a second sight almost, that had kept him from harm. A pity, Cartur thought ruefully, that it had not warned him about the man who had come seeking him. Recruitment followed, into an order Cartur did not truly understand, but one he joined willingly, for he trusted the man and would go on to think of him as a friend. It had led to a long, long life. For Cartur had not always been who he was now. He had needed to change. A beggar, an artist, a mercenary, he had played the roles, adopted the personas. He had kept ahead of

his own immortality. How curious, then, that it felt as if that supposedly endless existence was coming to a finale at last.

He needed to reach the man now, though not in person, for Cartur had no idea where he might be or what mission he might be engaged in for *them*. A message would have to suffice, cast out into the ether like a ship in a bottle.

Ahead, at last, the safe haven.

It loomed at the end of a wide, paved esplanade, a fortress of stone and steel. A short flight of steps led up to the esplanade from street level.

Cartur leapt the steps two at a time, his fear lending him urgency and strength.

As he reached a broad iron gate, the turret guns embedded in the paired watchtowers either side of the entrance tracked his movement. Flickering red targeting arrays painted his body.

Cartur delved into his uniform jacket, a black leather duster with a clenched fist holding a set of scales rendered in gold and patched over the left breast. He quickly pulled out his lock-stave and held it up to the tracking beams.

A few seconds lapsed that felt much longer, though he resisted the urge to look back again. They were coming, he knew, both of them – but now they would have to penetrate metre-thick rockcrete, face a pair of fully loaded autocannon turrets and overwhelm a precinct house's entire garrison before they got to him.

A chime sounded, dull, resonant. As the gate slowly slid open, Cartur hoped these defences would give him enough time to reach the man he knew as John.

Slipping through a crack in the gate the moment it was wide enough to admit him, Cartur plunged inside the fortress precinct to immediately be met by his chief-proctor.

The man was broader than Cartur and a head taller in his grey combat armour. He clutched a shotgun across his chest, the icon of the fist and scales emblazoned proudly across his chest. A shock maul hung loosely from his belt, deactivated but fully charged.

'Judge Umenedies,' said the chief-proctor, an invitation to be given orders.

'Seal the gate, Rench,' replied Cartur, shucking off his black duster and reaching for a proffered carapace breastplate from one of the other troopers present.

Proctor Rench had assembled twenty men in full combat armour, all bar two of them armed with shotguns. The odd men out carried heavy-grade plasma guns, the stub-nosed Brutas-pattern variant common to hive law enforcement on this world.

The gate sequence reversed, locking bolts slamming into place with a dull

metallic thud that boomed loudly in the draughty entrance hall.

'Use burners, Rench – melt the damn thing shut.'

A slight tilt of the head suggested the chief-proctor wanted to know why, but discipline had been ingrained to such a degree that he obeyed without question, and snapped curt commands at two of his men to grab the necessary equipment and set to it.

'You hold here. Do you understand, Rench?'

Rench nodded, grim, resigned.

Cartur had voxed ahead as soon as he realised he was being followed. He had given Rench a story about what was coming. Civil disobedience had become rife over the last few weeks, as if a fever had overtaken the populace and buried in them a root of such discord that it prompted mass acts of madness and insurrection. Privately, Cartur had wondered if there was something more than just mania stoking these fanatical flames. He had planned on leaving his current life and 'retiring' Cartur Umenedies. He had been here long enough and sometimes overheard comments about his 'surprising youthfulness'. Comments led to investigation, which led to discovery. That could not be allowed to happen. He had decided that Cartur would be posted off-world. He would play the part, the fond farewell, the grateful peace after his many years of service. Once aboard the shuttle, it would be easy. Change attire, accent, subtle facial expressions. He would become someone else, and then he would return and the entire cycle would begin anew.

City-wide disorder, possibly country or even planetary-wide, had put paid to that. He had overstayed, become trapped, and now someone had come for him. At last.

The two troopers returned with the burners and started on the gate. Cartur was already moving by then, holstering his sidearm and taking a modified Phobos-pattern bolter handed to him by one of Rench's men.

The chief-proctor was still shouting at his men, organising them into position as Cartur left the entrance hall and another reinforced door slammed shut and sealed behind him. He nodded to the ten troopers in the next room, an armoury, their brandished riot shields parting to let Cartur through.

A third door, also then sealed behind him, led Cartur to a vox-chamber, small enough to be cramped even for a man alone. Cartur sat down in the only chair and engaged the device on the desk in front of him. It looked like an old gramophone, the long tubular neck of the vox-corder leading all the way to a flaring receiver horn. Cartur leaned in, the low crackle of the vox-corder familiar

but of little comfort. Outside an explosion sounded, muffled but close. The walls shook, dislodging a train of dust.

Then the lights died, and a red glow washed over everything as the emergency generatorium activated. Then the glow died too, and the darkness came.

Then men began to die.

Cartur heard gunfire. Relayed through two sealed doors, it sounded indistinct, distant. The shouts of dying men did not. That easily penetrated his aegis. Bringing the bolter had been foolish. It was of no use to him here, not any more. He had taken it out of fear and some misguided belief that he could live through this. He would not live through this, so Cartur leaned in again and started to speak.

Rench saw the doors blow off, a plosive charge tearing through their fixings with a roar, followed by a resonant clang of iron as they hit the ground.

He didn't move. His men didn't move. They held steady.

'Targeters,' he said, trying to sound commanding.

Twenty red beams flashed out into the darkness, sweeping and intersecting. A grenade bounced in from outside and every man tensed before smoke began to fill the entrance hall, turning the targeting beams grainy.

Respirators were slipped on, and Rench's slow unsteady breathing filled his ears, magnified by his mask.

'Hold position,' he said, trying to sound confident across the vox-feed. Interrogatives from the sergeant in the next room flickered up on his flash-visor but he ignored them.

The smoke had crept to every nook and cranny, the room engulfed and the excess spilling outside. Something moved within it, too fast to see, too veiled to even feel. But this was not Rench's killer. No, he came a moment later and made no attempt to hide.

The gunfire ended quickly. It ended with the resistance of his men, Cartur knew. He thought he had heard a rifle snap amongst the booming retorts of combat shotguns and the whine of plasma guns. Now it was over, and the air grew still again. The vox-corder crackled, dead air reigning for a few seconds. Using a dusty old keypad, Cartur punched in the transmit codes and was about to send the message when he felt a presence. Reaching for a pistol, an antique of alien-origin that he always kept in this room with the other anachronistic items, Cartur suddenly felt the knife at his neck. He half turned.

He would have begged for mercy, but the deed was ignoble and would do no

good anyway. Instead, his eyes widened as he came face-to-face with his killer.

'I did not think it would be you. I thought you–'

Cartur stopped talking. He was drowning in his own blood, a red cascade issuing from the gash in his throat, an over-wide smile that kept on growing until it bled him white.

Eldrad Ulthran stood over the man's corpse. He did not know him, he had not been privy to all of the Cabal's many operatives, but this one had been functionally immortal. At least, his life was long-lived. He had suspected the man would have had many in order to hide his gift. The others would be harder to kill, the ones who could regenerate tissue, but that was for another time. Even immortality had its shades. At least this one would not return and the skein of fate would be all the clearer for his absence.

Operating the vox-corder, marvelling at the crude, ancient and yet surprisingly functional apparatus, he listened to the man's message.

It was a warning, to John. This one Eldrad *did* know. He had approached Grammaticus before and would need to do so again.

'I can't let him warn you, John,' he murmured, and stretched out his hand. Lightning coursed through the apparatus, serpentine, pervasive, until all that remained was a smoking ruin and the last vestiges of dissipating corposant. And then even that was gone.

The door opened, his mind providing the impetus, and Eldrad smelled hot copper.

Then he stepped from the room to see what Narek had wrought.

FOURTEEN

A long-held truth, at last revealed

The Iron Fathers were not alone when Meduson met them.

The gathering took place in the shell of a large auditorium, its roof lost to age and war. Broken columns of the gothic style lay heaped about, appended by rumble and obscured by thick layers of dust.

Evidently, it had been abandoned for some time and whatever games had once played out inside its curving and artistically rendered walls had since faded to echoes of memory. Another lost culture had faded with it. Another world languishing in ruins like so many others, insignificant, unwatched. Meduson did not know its name. Some he knew, but not this one. It had a designation – 'grey forge'. There had been 'black forge', 'dark anvil', 'silver hand'. They had spent them all, for each place would only be used once before it was discarded.

If the galaxy keeps burning, all hidden places shall eventually run out.

As he walked across the arena floor, his war council, the primarch and his warriors in tow, Meduson wondered if perhaps the auditorium would see one last game played to its empty, dilapidated stands.

Kuleg Rawt and the other Fraters had brought a small army.

Medusan Immortals flanked their iron lords as still as statues, armed with breacher shields and sheathed chainblades. Depowered, dull-eyed servitors slumped at rest behind them, their weapon arms currently dormant. Even in the low light of standing sodium-lamps, which flared and buzzed irritatedly, Meduson could make out volkite culverins and heavy bolters amongst the cyborganics' armaments.

Without needing to be ordered, Lumak and Mechosa moved either side of their Warleader as he came to a halt.

‘This feels mildly portentous,’ remarked Lumak quietly, hand resting on the hilt of his nameless sword.

For once, Nuros didn’t chide him about it.

The Salamander stood nearby, distracted by the presence of the primarch, who graciously waited in Meduson’s shadow, his own warriors as close to him as armour.

Dalcoth kept his distance, seeing more from afar than he did up close.

Aug stood with Meduson and took it upon himself to begin proceedings, though even he appeared to be surprised at the demonstration of force.

‘Fraters, you have come to this gathering well protected.’

‘Yes,’ said Meduson, stepping forward of Aug, ‘why is that?’

Rawt answered, not wearing his helmet this time, allowing Meduson to see his face. It looked cold, resolved, which led Meduson to wonder what might be coming.

‘To meet again so soon after the attack,’ said Rawt. ‘It was prudent to bring protection.’

Meduson gestured to the numerous vox-baffles, signal-dampeners and blockers set up around the meeting place.

‘You do not trust our technology to keep us anonymous and out of harm’s way?’

‘You have put us in harm’s way,’ replied Norsson. ‘Indulging in a feud against the renegade Tybalt Marr.’

‘You won a great victory,’ said Kernag, conceding the point with a shallow nod of the head, ‘but it is obvious that Marr goaded you. Can you say, without any doubt, that your judgement is not impaired for this very reason? I cannot.’

‘*We* cannot,’ added Rawt, and went on further. ‘Our position becomes increasingly perilous, hence the retinues you see before you. I accept that. Peril is a fact of war, and our unfortunate decline.’

‘And to think,’ said Meduson, a wry smile on his face, ‘I summoned you all here to challenge your commitment to this cause.’

‘We follow it,’ said Kernag, his answer natural, without doubt. ‘The Iron Tenth shall have purpose again – but not to serve the personal ends of any Warleader.’

Meduson felt his teeth clench.

They have been planning this, a way to remove me.

He looked to Aug, but the Iron Father remained impassive and only listened.

Rawt revealed the truth of it at last, although, judging by the frequency of his mechanised tics, Arkborne desperately wanted to speak. Meduson wondered if

the others had ordered his silence after his mildly deranged comments on the *Iron Heart*'s bridge.

'Our purpose is to serve the will of the Gorgon,' uttered Rawt.

'You have said as much before.' Meduson glanced at the Iron Father of Clan Felg. 'Or at least one of your order has.' He stepped forwards again, clear of his council, a deliberate move to show his dominance. Only then did he notice the tracked weapon-mounts quietly following his every move. Meduson remained undaunted, but wondered again where all of this was leading. 'I hoped then that the venerable Iron Father of Clan Felg had let his injuries affect his good sense. Or that he spoke in reference to the fact that we shall always serve the Gorgon's will, by dint of being his sons.' He looked around at the automata in his midst and the cold eyes of the Immortals, death-sworn to their Iron Fathers by binding oaths of penance. His gaze alighted last on the four Fraters, those who stood in apparent judgement of him, Meduson now realised. It had all the makings of a trial, this meeting, or worse, a gladiatorial engagement.

'Ferrus Manus is dead,' said Meduson, surprised at the faint tremor of emotion in his voice.

And then Arkborne did speak, and Meduson knew the words he had said on the bridge of the *Iron Heart* had not been false, not to the Frater. Worse, Meduson realised the other Iron Fathers believed them too.

'The Gorgon lives.'

Meduson stared a moment at Arkborne, incredulous, then frowned, dismissing the madness that had just spilled from the Iron Father's mouth.

'Kuleg,' he began, 'you cannot believe this…'

Rawt smiled. He *actually* smiled, and the expression churned Meduson's insides with the realisation of just how far this insanity went.

'Our father has come back to us, Meduson. And he shall lead the Iron Tenth once more.'

'You are delusional, Kuleg. All of you,' Meduson said, aghast, regarding the four but still acutely aware of the warriors they commanded. He gestured to Vulkan, who drew back his drakescale hood as he stepped into the harsh sodium light. 'I bring a primarch. *Here*. Look upon him. You speak of…' He shook his head, dismayed. 'I don't know. It is madness to think–'

'Come no closer,' said Rawt, and it took a second for Meduson to realise he didn't mean him.

Every tracked auto-turret turned towards Vulkan, at the same time as a phalanx of Immortals marched out to flank him on either side. A score of heavily armed

servitors wakened with a grind of servos, their eyes flaring magnesium-white, their weapons trained on the primarch.

'I do not know this being.' Rawt turned to the primarch, imperious, cold.

'Nor I,' said Kernag, arms folded.

Norsson and Arkborne said the same.

Rawt stamped the ferrule of his long-hafted power axe against the arena floor. The blow echoed, almost a pronouncement, the declaration of a verdict.

'An imposter stands before us. Vulkan is dead.'

'Vulkan lives!' Nuros unsheathed his sword without hesitation, stopping just short of reaching for his volkite caliver and really spoiling proceedings.

'Brother…' Lumak warned, but his grip had tightened around the hilt of his weapon.

'I have a sword name for you, son of Ferrus,' said Nuros, almost growling, '*Betrayal*. Is that to be it?'

'I shall do us both a service and pretend you did not utter that just now.'

'Lumak, Nuros…' Meduson began, thinking he might have to intervene, when a resounding clang of metal arrested everyone's attention. Even the Immortals gave pause.

A hammer laid before the two councils, heavy, artisanal.

Vulkan held out his hands, palms upwards.

No shackles the Iron Fathers possessed could hold him. The gesture was symbolic.

'Peace,' said Vulkan, his deep voice calm. 'The Iron Father is right. You do not know me, and none here you trust can vouch for my provenance.'

Rawt slowly nodded, then gestured to two of his Immortals. The faceless warriors unstrapped their breacher shields so they could retrieve Vulkan's hammer. It needed both to lift it, the strain required evident in their trembling limbs.

'It's called *Urdrakule*,' said Vulkan, following the Immortals with his gaze. 'It means the *Burning Hand*. Be aware that I know every scratch on it.'

Despite himself, Nuros gave Lumak a less poisonous glance and Meduson felt some of the tension ease.

'Your blade, Nuros,' said Vulkan, still watching the Immortals as they lumbered. The primarch's sworn warriors had remained disciplined throughout, but Meduson recognised in them a readiness to fight if the need arose.

A dull scrape of metal against a leather scabbard echoed a moment later.

Meduson turned to face Vulkan's accusers, ignoring the scores of weapons

trained upon him and his Shattered Legion brethren.

'What now then, Fraters? You declare the Lord of Drakes false and claim our dead father reborn. How long have you harboured these beliefs? Am I next to face judgement?'

Norsson sneered and the hypocrisy of it sickened Meduson.

'It has already been made where you are concerned… *Terran*.'

Kernag unfolded his arms to rest a hand on the pommel of his blade. That too was symbolic.

'Shadrak Smyth is no *Medusan*.'

'You have been reckless,' said Rawt at last, 'even you must concede that.'

'Risks must be taken, Kuleg,' Meduson replied. 'To do anything other is to hide and embrace extinction. Surely, *you* can see *that*.'

Rawt nodded.

'I seek neither. I counsel only temperance. We must wait.'

'For what? The longer we vacillate, the closer our enemies come to finding us.'

'You misunderstand, Meduson. We wait not to make a decision – our purpose is already forged. We wait for *him*…'

'What is this?' asked Meduson, and saw Vulkan tense. The primarch observed a pensive silence.

'Step down as Warleader,' Rawt demanded, 'and let the Iron Fathers take temporary command of the Legion. Step down, Meduson,' he said, anger colouring his words.

'Or face your consequences?' Meduson asked, unimpressed at Rawt's sudden bravado. 'You would attack a primarch? Are you mad?'

'I know not what he is. It would not be the first time traitors have come to us wearing the colours of allies. A bitter lesson, well learned, that I do not intend to repeat. Step. Down.'

'That was Isstvan.'

'I saw him die, Meduson. Consumed by a nuclear fire.'

'And our father had his head cut from his shoulders. Why believe one miracle and not the other?'

Rawt paused. A flicker of emotion made his pale cheek twitch.

'I could ask the same of you.'

Meduson clenched and unclenched his fists, trying to maintain composure. A lapse in discipline now could prove extremely costly. 'This is treason, against Throne, against Emperor, against Imperium,' he said. 'You renege on your oaths, Kuleg.'

Rawt beat a fist against his chest. ’I uphold them! I commit treason against you alone, Warleader, a man whose authority I do not recognise.’

‘Aug, counsel your fellow Fraters,’ said Meduson, ‘and I shall see past this grotesque lapse in reason.’

Aug did not answer.

Meduson frowned, confused.

‘Jebez…’

‘I cannot.’

‘What did you say, brother?’

Aug turned to stand alongside the other Iron Fathers.

‘I said, I cannot. This is the Gorgon’s will, Shadrak. I could not go against it even if I wanted to.’

Rawt stepped aside, so did Norsson and Kernag. Arkborne took some gentle urging, unwilling to be parted from the figure that loomed behind them, cloaked in shadows until that moment.

There was time for one last piece of theatre then.

Aug’s face became still as marble, as whatever fraternity Meduson once knew with him hardened too.

‘We are the cult of the Gorgon, as we have been since Isstvan. Ferrus Manus lives.’

Aug stepped aside, and the figure upon the throne behind him moved into the light.

FIFTEEN

One of the old kind, his fate decided

The seer gazed up at the sunlit apex of the ziggurat and gave a sigh of resignation.

Despite his excellent physiology, the climb had proven taxing and a fine veneer of sweat layered his skin. Acid burned in his joints.

'No psychic powers,' he muttered, griping. And climbing.

Each step rose almost half a metre before yielding to the next. It made for hard going, especially in the heat.

The sun had reached its zenith, and blazed with quiet, distant fury, slowly cooking the seer in his armour. The air throbbed, thick, hazy and reeking of the fecund jungle. A dense canopy stretched below, as vast and seamless as an ocean. The upper echelons of the ziggurat had mercifully crested the thickly layered trees several steps ago and subsequently provided a vantage point to observe the endless green beneath.

The seer cared little for the view, though he preferred it to being beneath the jungle canopy. In the arboreal gloom below, the atmosphere had been almost tangible, palpably resisting his passage. The cloying, pungent blooms and earth scents had grown suffocating. Hanging vines snagged on weapons and armour. Great horned creatures of hard chitin and carapace emerged from burrows or the diseased boles of immense trees, noisome and aggressive. Even the flora hungered. Spiny cycads, fungal colonies, needle-fanged bladder traps and pitchers lined in flesh-eating mucilage shuddered with sentient hostility. And the droning… The endless, nerve-shredding discourse of arachnids, orthoptera and hexapoda…

'You had better be up there,' growled the seer, pausing to wipe his brow before

resuming the climb.

After several more hours, he reached the summit.

No guards barred his way, which was either foolish on behalf of his prey or a sign of his colossal arrogance. Instead, a massive dais stretched before him. Even etched in strange sigils and wrought of something akin to stone but somehow different, it reminded the seer of a landing pad. No gunships ever came here, though; no vessels of any kind did. It could only be reached via secret paths known to those of the Cabal.

Eldrad Ulthran had once been a part of that order. He believed he still was – his *orientation* had merely changed.

But the Cabal had meddled and it, like the long lives of some of those who served it, had to end. The Acuity had been wrong, or, at least, imperfect. Humanity's extinction would not bring about the outcome foretold.

'Gahet…'

An old word, an old name, for one of the old kind.

At its utterance, the corpulent figure quietly meditating at the summit of the ziggurat opened its eyes. Something ophidian persisted about Gahet. His skin looked gelid to the touch.

+Eldrad, I knew you would come,+ he said, without moving his lips.

'Then I am surprised I find you unguarded,' answered the seer, and then realised he could not move. His hand froze a finger's width from drawing his blade, refusing to go further. He could breathe, but only just, his chest crushed by an inexorable weight.

+I need no guards to protect me from you. I allowed you to come into my presence. I watched you through the jungle, throughout the long climb.+ Gahet blinked. A pale nictitating membrane slid across his eye, slow, deliberate. The pain in the seer's chest increased. +The journey has left you weary.+

The seer answered with difficulty. 'It seems I underestimated you, Gahet.'

+I am of the old kind, Eldrad. Did you really believe you could come here and kill me?+

'You sound disappointed.'

+Merely intrigued,+ Gahet conceded. +You have been altering fate, old friend.+

'I don't recall us ever being friends.'

Gahet's eyes narrowed to reptilian slits as the pain in Eldrad's chest increased again. +Why?+

Scalpels of agony burned into the seer's skull as Gahet tried to strip back the layers of his mind.

+Curious. You resist.+

'The Acuity…' gasped the seer, and tasted blood in his mouth. 'There is a third– *hnng*–outcome. Mankind…'

+Has to fall. You have seen this. The Primordial Annihilator shall triumph and its fire will burn, but like all hungry flames it will gutter and fail.+

'You cannot see all ends, Gahet. Mankind must survive. Horus must–' the seer managed, interrupting himself with another incoherent grunt of pain, '*gnng*–fall.'

Gahet drew closer, and the alien's proximity brought yet greater agony.

+You are hiding something, Eldrad. Plucking the skein. Who is your pawn this time, now the Gorgon is dead? Have you cultivated another?+ Gahet drew closer still. He gave off no scent, and his body radiated no warmth, though the form he wore might have been a shell, a simulacrum to better match his environs. His psychic assault felt real enough, though. The seer had to clench his teeth to prevent himself biting off his tongue. His limbs trembled, his bones, his marrow. +Am I an impediment to this scheme?+

'Yes… you… are.'

+And you have killed others. Immortals and agents, even Cabal.+

'I will… kill… more.'

+I cannot allow that, Eldrad. You mind is strong but you cannot– What are you hiding? Something else. Deeper…+

The seer couldn't answer. He could barely hear over the thunderous beat of two hearts stretched to their limit.

+Why are you smiling, Eldrad?+

He heard that. Gahet had allowed it. He wanted answers.

'Because…' said the seer, his body straining with every iota of its transhuman strength, 'I'm not Eldrad.'

Gahet's eyes widened as the witchblade pierced his bloated body. A protest died on his lips as eldritch lightning coursed through him, reducing his bones, his flesh, simulacrum or not, to ash.

Eldrad, the *true* Eldrad, scattered the remains across the ziggurat with a sudden burst of violent telekinesis.

'Well,' said Narek, breathing hard and having fallen to one knee, his body bent over and held up by trembling arms, 'that was deeply unpleasant.'

The glamour masking his true form had faded to reveal a battered, blood-stained legionary wearing cracked war-plate and a ragged scowl as he looked up at the eldar.

‘I didn’t like this plan, xenos. I prefer it when I steal in under smoke and kill everyone with my rifle.’ He spat up a gobbet of phlegm and blood. ‘Or knife. Let’s do that from now on, shall we?’

‘Gahet required something subtler, more oblique,’ said Eldrad. He had sheathed his witchblade and begun to write in the air with his fingertips.

‘Sword through the gut, then set on fire.’ Narek nodded, finally getting to his feet again. ‘I’m surprised he even noticed.’

Eldrad ignored him, sarcasm evidently lost on the eldar. A rune had begun to materialise, fashioned from tendrils of light. It had many facets, angular cells created by intersecting curves and accents.

‘Is that your language, xenos?’

‘An arcane one. It is a divination.’

‘You mean *fate?*’

‘In a manner of speaking.’

‘Looking for another strand to cut? How many before it’s done?’

‘You mean how many before I am done with you.’

‘Exactly. I want what you promised me, seer. Do not think to renege on that.’

‘I have no intention of doing so, but the skeins are myriad and the cutting of one affects another and another, and so on.’ The rune grew brighter, coalescing more fully with each drawn iteration. ‘It takes time.’

Shadows appeared within the facets, shadows that became apparitions and figments, lives rendered in ghostly resonance, unravelling in a cascade of images and impressions.

Narek came closer, drawn by the flickering phantasms, some moving too fast to see, others lingering as the seer made a determination.

A woman, a mother, her daughters held close. The confines of a ship, claustrophobic, overcrowded.

‘Not her…’ murmured the seer.

‘What am I seeing, xenos?’

‘Echoes, heathen, of lives lived, of those yet to be lived, and some never to be lived at all.’

Now a farmer, tending his crop, enjoying the noonday sun beating down upon his back, a flask of water in his hand, gratefully imbibed.

Eldrad lingered on this one, unspooling back and forth along the skein like a projectionist examining a roll of film. Narek had seen certain remembrancers do the same, long ago now, before the war, during the Crusade. It had intrigued him. Then the scene developed, revealing more. Revealing another.

‘Him?’

‘Yes, eventually.’

And then the skein turned again, and the seer plucked the thread, pulling it, teasing it until it stretched, a thin psychic meniscus of potentiality that revealed a tall warrior in sculpted armour, long silver hair flowing down his back.

Narek recognised the armour’s provenance, if not its wearer.

‘One of yours.’

‘Tell me, heathen, do you consider all of humanity your kin?’

Narek snorted, amused. ‘No, of course not.’

‘He is not *one of mine*, though we share the same race. He is Cabal.’

‘Like that one?’ Narek gestured to the ash stain that had been Gahet.

‘Nothing like him. This one will be much harder to kill.’ With a curt gesture, Eldrad banished the rune. Motes of dust and light drifted in its absence and then were gone. He turned to face his huntsman.

‘Less oblique.’

Narek smiled.

‘I like him already.’

SIXTEEN

The Gorgon, unmasked

Vulkan's gaze had not wavered from the hulking silhouette upon the throne. At the edge of the crowd, beyond the phalanx of breacher shields, past the slack-jawed servitors and the auto-slaved gun rigs, lingering at the periphery of his vision, he saw the *other*. The ghoul. The emaciated husk, wretched and angry.

'Ferrus…'

He shut his eyes, hard. No one had heard him. He had either whispered his brother's name or not spoken it aloud. Vulkan looked again, and the apparition of his old madness had gone but the other one still remained, the one cloaked and seated upon a throne like some king of old Albia.

Stature alone marked it out as something other than a legionary. It wore power armour, its mechanical rhythms familiar but oddly discomforting.

It cannot be him. He is dead. If it is him then it means that I have lost my sanity. If it is him, I could still be inside the mountain and this could all be a figment of a fevered mind.

The primarchs, at least some, could sense the presence of a sibling. Vulkan should have been able to detect truth from falsehood but called his instincts into question. He had seen Ferrus before in far darker circumstances than this. For one horrible moment, he considered he might never have dragged himself from that caldera beneath Deathfire at all, and instead still dreamed within the heart-blood of Nocturne.

Vulkan's eye alighted on the hand – the 'iron hand', though no falser honorific could be used to describe it. Silver shone in the weak light, caught and reflected by this miraculous limb. Neither iron nor silver, the metal of its creation defied any known classification. One thing *was* known.

It was unique.

Not just that, it had a finger missing.

Is this my brother I see before me?

Vulkan imagined himself reaching for the Ferrus shadow, in the manner of those who are haunted by the dead reach for the shades of the departed, but he remained still and the psychological trauma passed swiftly and unremarked.

'It is the will of Ferrus Manus,' said the one called Aug.

'Our primarch has returned to us,' said another, Kernag, the self-aggrandising one.

The hand rose, at least its remaining fingers did. And stayed raised.

Vulkan shut his eyes again, not willing to believe, to hope.

He is dead and the dead do not come back.

'All except for you, brother…'

Shut up, Ferrus. You are dead.

'Am I? Open your eyes and see, Vulkan. Tear off the mask, unless you fear what lies beneath it.'

'His will be done,' uttered Rawt, the oldest. Not a fanatic, this one. He *believed*, but in a cold, dispassionate way. The Gorgon had returned and so he had primacy. It was logical.

'You see, Meduson,' Aug was talking again, 'our father is reborn. I ask you, brother, see reason.'

'It isn't possible,' breathed Meduson. 'How can it be?'

'It is,' said Aug, as cold as his other iron brethren.

'But his body… It was maimed. Cut apart, a rotting corpse raised up as an effigy. I saw it.' The agony in Meduson's voice mirrored Vulkan's own, though the primarch kept it hidden. He dared not reveal it until he knew what *this* was, until he could be sure of his own senses.

'It is of no consequence,' Rawt said.

'Another has been forged in its stead,' added Kernag.

'Clad in adamantium and ceramite,' said Aug, 'stronger than before.'

'The flesh is weak,' hissed Arkborne, madness in his tone.

And then they all said it, a chorus of voices low and solemn that heralded a flock of vessels from above, their engine noise shaking the massive auditorium and dislodging dust from its well-worn footings.

Meduson looked up through the jagged remnants of the destroyed auditorium roof. Everyone except the Iron Fathers and their blank-eyed retinues looked up.

Gunships and lighters, battered old transports and bulky landers came down in proliferation, the myriad vessels of the Iron Hands officers and their allied cohorts.

'You summoned them, Aug.' Meduson looked down to meet his old friend's icy gaze.

'As bidden.'

'Not at my behest.'

'They come to witness the Gorgon's resurrection,' said Norsson, every word a barb, 'and the end to your leadership.'

Lumak bristled, and came close to drawing his sword for a second time. 'Be careful what you say, Frater. Meduson is Warleader and the other officers will recognise that.'

'Not when the primarch is amongst them. They will discard our false Warleader and embrace a saner head.'

Mechosa chuckled at that, despite himself.

'*This* is insane,' he whispered.

Meduson held up his hand for calm. He glanced at Vulkan, but the primarch remained impassive. Privately, Meduson wondered what was going through his mind. He knew he had to wait, that the political ice had grown thin beneath him since the costly raid that had led to Arkul Theld's death and precious little else.

A victory. Yes, it had been, but one without spoils. That tended to leave a bitter taste. Avoiding defeat was not the same as winning a battle.

Theld had been a veteran of high standing. Many knew him, had fought beside him, during the war and before in the Crusade. Those who had not met him before grew to know him and respect him. His death had been a blow and not just in a tactical sense. It had *hurt* them, and hurt Meduson's cause.

By now, he had no doubt that Gaeln Krenn would be souring those of Ungavaar in the wake of Theld's passing. And with Aug, a warrior he thought of as a friend, also turning against him, that left precious few clans disposed to Meduson's way of thinking. He had been blinded by vainglory and his obsession with Marr.

Whatever this 'primarch' was that Aug had seen fit to raise up in opposition, it had provided a figurehead for the Fraters to rally behind, part of a carefully disseminated plan to undermine and usurp Meduson. The irony, of course, being that Meduson had no desire to lead but knew that in the absence of another, more suitable candidate, he must. Devolution now would be disastrous. The Iron Tenth would fragment and likely never recover. He would not let it become a musty

banner grown still along a silent processional, a once great regiment forgotten.

He had to stop this.

The numerous vessels alighted on the bare arena floor, kicking up squalls of dust, twisted into swirling eddies by cycling turbofans slow to come to rest.

Without any discernible order, cargo and hold ramps opened. The auditorium resounded to the chime of metal striking earth; it sounded like the tolling of bells.

Meduson saw Borgus and Jakkus approach the gathering, the two officers, lieutenant and line captain, sharing some joke as their drop-ships soared skywards in their wake.

Others joined them, disparate but united in their battered and war-worn appearance.

The flesh *was* weak, but their metal had seen better days too.

As the noise died down, Aug took the stage.

'All here know me,' he began, and had the audacity to look Meduson in the eye.

'What is this, Frater?' asked Borgus, not one to mince words. 'I expected to be addressed by our Warleader.' Then his eyes went to the massive warrior clad in drakescale and Borgus could not hide his surprise.

The other newcomers acted in a similar way. Some bowed their heads reverently. Others narrowed their eyes, suspicious.

'It is a matter of tradition,' said Aug, ignoring the spate of muttering between the officers about the great warrior in their midst.

'Aug has not only one but two primarchs at his behest,' said Meduson, deliberately snide, 'though the Lord Vulkan obeys whilst at the end of a gun. Several guns. Several extremely large and powerful guns.'

If Vulkan had felt any provocation at Meduson's words, he did not show it.

'Isn't it obvious, Borgus?' said Aug, refusing to acknowledge the Warleader's attempt to get under his skin. 'We are divided. Our Warleader – our *former* Warleader – has seen to this. He brings us a primarch, or so he says.' Aug looked at Vulkan as he said it. 'Though he cannot vouch for his provenance. Caution must be observed, lest we fall foul of another trap. False friends and false colours are all too familiar to the Iron Tenth.' And here he regarded Nuros, Vulkan's retinue and Dalcoth. 'We have been without true leadership for too long. Meduson has done his best – no one could fault him for that – but he has been found wanting.'

A few of the other officers, especially the battle-captains with whom Meduson shared the greatest affinity, exchanged confused looks at Aug's unforeseen

rhetoric. To an outsider, Aug's position, by dint of arms alone, would look strong. He had engineered it this way – the architect, Meduson realised, of all the Fraters' dissent.

Apothecary Gorgonson had mentioned his concerns about what Aug went through on Lliax. The Martian Mechanicum evidently had stripped something away of the old warrior Meduson once knew. He had seen it, of course, but it had taken him this long to truly appreciate what it meant.

'Call it what it is, Aug,' said Meduson, voice tight with anger. 'You are staging a coup.'

'You misunderstand, brother.' That he meant that word, *brother,* turned Meduson's stomach worst of all. 'I am merely deferring to a higher echelon of leadership.'

'Whose?' asked Borgus, saying what was on everyone else's minds. 'Yours? The council's? We tried that. You yourself elevated Meduson.'

'That was before our father returned.'

'Blood of Medusa!' snarled Borgus, half drawing his sword. 'What did you just say?'

Borgus had fought on Isstvan, at least in the blighted atmosphere above it. He had seen pict-captures of the Gorgon's horrific death, broadcast by the traitors to any ships capable of still receiving a signal. It had been intended to sunder moral. It had rather the opposite effect, but any attempt to reach the surface had proven impossible, or fatal.

'The Gorgon lives,' uttered Rawt, choosing that moment to confirm his allegiance.

Unlike Borgus, some of the other officers looked uncertain. All were drawn to the figure on the throne as the Iron Fathers, who had risen up against their rightfully appointed Warleader, turned to it and genuflected in demonstration of their unshakable fealty. Even Arkborne knelt, the discomfort of doing so writ plain on his stoic features.

A silver hand stirred, fingers raised as if in greeting.

The Iron Hands knelt as one, all except Meduson and his warriors, and Borgus whose anger kept him on his feet.

'This is madness,' he said, spitting out the words.

In the same moment, Vulkan opened his eyes.

Vulkan saw not the apparition of his nightmares, but nor did he see his brother cloaked and enthroned like a king.

He began to approach, the whine of targeting auto-locks accompanying his footfalls like a discordant refrain. He stopped.

'You are aware,' he said calmly, his eye on the enthroned king, 'that I cannot be killed. I am more than just immortal, more than long-lived.'

Vulkan felt his Draaksward tense, and held out a hand, low and inconspicuous. Zytos, Gargo and Abidemi stopped just short of drawing their weapons.

'I swore to myself I would not interfere, but in this you involve Ferrus and I cannot let that stand. Let me see my brother,' he said, yet to lower his hand. 'Bring him into the light. Let me see him.'

Aug's right eye twitched as a flood of binaric data cascaded to the auto-turrets, powering them down. They bowed like vassals to their liege lord.

'Brother… come forward,' said Vulkan, moving slowly again, his hand still outstretched. 'Brother, heed me. It is Vulkan.'

All eyes looked to the Gorgon, shrouded by his cloak and the shadows. His fingers rose and then fell.

Vulkan turned his gaze on Aug. 'Am I to talk to the hand then? Is this what you have done to him?' He saddened as he regarded his brother. 'What have they reduced you to, dear Ferrus,' he whispered, tears glistening, as red as rubies.

'I see only one falsehood here,' declared Meduson.

'As do I,' murmured Vulkan sadly, and splayed the fingers of his outstretched hand.

The hammer, *Urdrakule*, flew into his grasp from where it lay with an echoing chime of metal against metal, as if compelled by a potent magnetic force. The two Iron Hands guarding it were powerless to stop it. Vulkan lunged, hammer trailing in his wake, to tear the cloak from the Gorgon and expose the lie beneath.

A skeleton remained, one of mechanisms and polished steel, of scavenged scrap, limbs and ribs, even an eyeless skull. It had the stature of Ferrus but nothing else, aside from the silver arm.

This was genuine enough, carrion taken from the battlefield. Restitched, hung by wire, fastened by clamp and bolt, it rested limply by the golem's side, the fingers twitching with nervous animation.

Aug and the other Fraters went to intercede but Vulkan would not be stopped. He roared, his anguish as raw now as it had been when he had first learned of his brother's death.

He swung the hammer and felled the grim effigy in one blow. He then reached out to grab Aug by the throat.

‘An insult,’ said Vulkan, his voice thick with emotion. ‘An ersatz version of my brother, of *your* father. Has the Iron Tenth sunk so low?’

The hand twitched, but without scheme or pattern. It hung distended from the rest of the crushed remains.

‘You are fortunate, Iron Father, that I have a forgiving nature,’ Vulkan said to Aug. He let him go, a glare at the others warning them to stay out of his way, and advanced on the silver arm of Ferrus Manus.

‘My brother thought he was inviolable,’ declared Vulkan. ‘Sadly that is my burden. But perhaps a part of him was. I won’t see it defiled further or turned to insane purpose.’

He brought *Urdrakule* down upon the silver arm and the inviolable became violable. It shattered as glass shatters before a heavy blow, and scattered across the arena. A few fragments touched Aug’s boots and he reached for them before withdrawing his hand.

Vulkan let the hammer slide through his fingers, weary, his anger fading. It had been folly to get involved in Meduson’s struggle, and he realised now he could be no further part of it. He must reach Terra; everything depended on that.

‘It’s over, Aug,’ said Meduson, coming to stand by Vulkan’s side, not blind to the propaganda of his actions. ‘The Gorgon cult is finished, but the Iron Tenth remain.’

It had been symbolic, the destruction of the Gorgon’s hand. To break so utterly something believed unbreakable, it robbed it of all power and denied that power to any who sought to profit from it.

For Aug and the Fraters it was the currency they needed to assume leadership. The scales had shifted again. Meduson saw it in the faces of the battle-captains and the other officers. He saw it also in the Fraters. Not Aug, and the four sworn to the cult, but in the others. Allegiance, acceptance. He led, they would follow.

For the moment at least, Meduson had a primarch at his side, and he would make the most of it.

‘Our father is dead. He died on the black sands of Isstvan, surrounded by the bodies of the Clan Avernii,’ he said, looking at Lumak and receiving a nod of respect in turn, ‘and drowning in his own blood, before his neck was cut.’

The mood grew abruptly solemn. Many bowed their heads, even those who were not of the Tenth.

‘The Iron Hands could have died that day also, but we endured. Our deeds and honour endured. The flesh is weak, but the Tenth are not. We stand, but we only

stay standing if we remember our bonds of loyalty to each other and to the Throne. I stand before you Shadrak Meduson, born of Terra, but forged of Medusa.' He looked to Aug and the other treasonous Fraters. 'I will challenge any who dispute me. I need every blade. *Every* blade. Every iron-born son who yet draws breath and wears the black. Every noble Drake. Every vaunted Raven of Kiavahr. All of us.'

A great cheer swelled, shaking the auditorium.

Meduson took the crowd's adulation with stoic modesty, and knew the tide had turned. He would convince Aug, he would convince Rawt and the others.

'I do not seek the dissolution of the Tenth,' he said to them and them alone. The Fraters listened keenly, unable to do anything else. 'I would see it reforged anew with the leadership it deserves. For now, I wear that mantle of leadership – but only for now. I work towards a Legion governed by wisdom and experience, a clan council striving in concert with a strong military leader. Many voices, speaking as one. That is what I envisage. It will come, but we must fight to get there.'

A few amongst the Fraters nodded. Even Rawt lowered his gaze in contrition.

'I would have us rise from the blow that has been dealt, not for pride, not for vengeance, but out of duty – to our primarch and our Emperor. For make no mistake, He has need of us now.'

He looked to Aug, for where he led Meduson knew the others would follow.

'I will have loyalty,' he said to his old friend, his Hand Elect. 'Our brotherhood demands it. Our duty requires it.'

Aug had sunk to his knees, a knight before the mercy of his king.

'Forgive us,' he whispered, and some of the old warrior Meduson had known returned. Aug looked to the scattered remnants of the golem. His gaze lingered, but went back to Meduson. 'We wanted too desperately for it to be real. Forgive us, Shadrak. Warleader.'

Rawt and the others bowed their heads, even Arkborne, who knew he had erred.

'Let us serve, Warleader,' Rawt implored.

'The Iron Fathers pledge to Meduson, and he alone,' said Kernag.

Norsson and Arkborne too murmured their assent.

Meduson regarded them all, kneeling before him. He drew his sword of Albian steel. A flash of light ran down the blade.

'Then so be it,' said Aug, and bared his neck. 'I have failed you as your Hand Elect.'

'Swear on this sword,' said Meduson, and held out the blade sideways before

them. ‘Swear your loyalty to the Iron Tenth and to me. Swear it and rejoin this brotherhood.’

Aug touched his augmetic fingers to the metal.

So did Rawt, and Kernag, and Norsson, and Arkborne, though his fingers trembled with dysfunction.

‘It is sworn,’ said Aug.

Meduson nodded, raising his sword as the cheers resounded anew.

SEVENTEEN

The tragedy of iron, doomed to repeat itself

Vulkan regarded the hammer, pensive, crouched, his chin resting upon a clenched fist. *Urdrakule* sat innocuously enough, its heavier head pitching the haft at a sharp angle where it balanced on the bench.

It had felled a primarch, or the golem of one at least. The scars in the metal hammerhead shone brightly where it had struck the false Gorgon, both shattering the grim effigy and proving the frailty of supposed 'inviolable' silver. It had exposed another weakness too, one in the fabric of the Iron Hands.

Zytos watched Vulkan from across the room, but he thought about the Iron Tenth, or rather their hosts in the Iron Tenth. He had served within the Shattered Legions, and knew what it meant to be part of a force alloyed from different tactics, different cultures, different creeds. Some might consider the Iron Hands extreme in their beliefs. The primacy of metal over flesh had a binary aspect to it. Zytos knew things were seldom that straightforward.

He wondered if Shadrak Meduson did too.

Back in the auditorium, in the ruins of another broken world, he saw a Legion riven by belief. And doubt. It had damaged the Iron Hands, the death of the Gorgon. It had hurt them more deeply than they realised, and would ever realise, because of their disposition towards the machine. Scrape out the flesh, strip away emotion, let metal reign.

The tragedy of it saddened Zytos.

'Whatever it is, this rift,' he murmured, 'it isn't over. This Legion is at war with itself because of its beliefs.'

The ship rumbled in plaintive empathy. They had returned to their quarters aboard the *Iron Heart* shortly after Meduson's pronouncement. Vulkan had said

little, even by his taciturn standards. With his Iron Fathers stepping back into line, Meduson had done what he needed to, but he had used Vulkan to achieve his victory. Or so it seemed to Zytos.

The gathering had disbanded, scattering again until a plan could be made. Greater victories appeared to be the aim, or greater scalps. Zytos had overhead Nuros and Lumak discussing tactics, and in particular the importance attributed to the renegade Tybalt Marr, and wondered if the two were even divisible as far as their Warleader was concerned.

'They suffer too much pride, brother. Pride is the warrior's curse. How much blood has been falsely spilled in the name of pride, I wonder?' Abidemi sat on a nearby stool, running a sharp stone slowly and methodically across each of *Draukoros'* serrated teeth.

'You treat that sword like a relic,' Zytos said. 'I hope you'll use it as keenly when the time comes.'

Abidemi laughed, then grew solemn.

'I will honour Numeon with it, Barek.'

Zytos smiled at him. 'Aye, Atok, I know you will.'

'They stand at a fork in the road, the Tenth' said Abidemi. 'One of those forks is Meduson, the other is not.'

'They have a tenuous unity,' said Zytos. 'Meduson drives them with his dogged refusal to give in and hard-won charisma. I doubt it comes easy to him, but he has risen to it anyway.'

Abidemi nodded. 'They will ask us to fight with them,' he said. 'I think a lot depends on our father's answer.'

'Perhaps we should,' said Gargo and looked up from his tinkering. He had his right arm laid across a workbench, still attached to his shoulder but with its inner mechanisms exposed, the outer casing removed but within reach. Gargo's other hand delved for tools from a rudimentary kit scavenged up by Nuros. He curled each finger in turn, until he had made a fist. Then he did it again, examining the adamantium skeletal structure: phalanges, metacarpals, carpals all rendered in exacting, albeit facsimiled, detail.

'This is no denying a primarch would greatly improve Meduson's chances of victory,' said Abidemi.

'And yet we won't commit to this war. I am certain of Vulkan's answer.'

Though the primarch had said little of what might lie ahead, the three Drakes knew of another eldritch gate, one that would get them back onto the path. Vulkan meant to reach it, and could allow for no distractions, however noble.

Gargo scowled, the means to significantly enhance the efficacy of his crude bionic eluding him for now. He reaffixed the casing in short order, and went to join his brothers.

'Perhaps father could look at it,' suggested Zytos, affording Gargo a side glance.

'I would not trouble him.'

Zytos frowned. Vulkan did look greatly troubled.

'Did you know it could do that?' asked Gargo, at length.

Zytos turned, and frowned again.

Gargo took it as a prompt to explain.

'The hammer. It returned to his hand. I have never seen that before.'

Zytos considered it. 'Nor I.'

'Our father knows many secrets of metallurgy,' said Abidemi.

'It's not the metal, Atok,' said Zytos.

'No, not just that. It's old technology, the kind T'kell saved from the vaults.'

They all fell silent at the mention of the forgemaster. He and several others, warriors of the Firedrakes known as the Unscarred, had left Prometheus and taken the ship *Chalice of Fire* with them. No word had reached Nocturne of their mission since. Many amongst the Legion believed T'kell and his expedition lost, likely dead. Zytos did not expect to see them again. He doubted he would even see Nocturne again.

'And that?' Zytos gestured to the talisman Vulkan wore around his neck. 'How old is that technology? Old enough that our father remembers nothing of its forging?'

'It concerns you,' said Abidemi.

'Does it not you?'

Gargo clenched and unclenched his fist, still unhappy. 'It looks innocuous.'

'The deadliest weapons usually do.'

Further discussion would have to wait as a warrior in black armour appeared at the doorway.

'I hadn't expected to find it open,' said the Clan Avernii, Lumak.

Zytos turned to him. 'We have no secrets, son of Ferrus.'

Lumak nodded, only half-engaged, and looked to Vulkan. If he thought anything about the primarch sitting in the shadows, estranged from his sons, he did not mention it. He had a weathered look, as did most of the Tenth, but he was particularly grizzled.

'Lord Vulkan,' he said, in a deep voice, gritty with age, 'the Warleader requests

your presence in the strategium. It concerns your mutual goals.'

Vulkan broke from his reverie to attend the captain.

'I remember the Avernii,' he said, 'how you laid down your lives to try to save my brother.'

'A task which we failed to accomplish, my lord.'

'None could have fought harder. There is no shame in the act.'

'And yet our father is still dead…' His steady gaze alighted on the hammer. 'Twice over.'

'That thing was not your father, nor was it my brother.'

'No, it was not,' said Lumak. 'So why do I feel my shame anew?'

Vulkan left *Urdrakule* where it was as he got to his feet. A shadow crossed the primarch's face, as if he were reliving a painful memory, but it passed so quickly as to go unremarked.

'Take me to Meduson, captain.'

Lumak gave a shallow bow. 'Of course, my lord. This way.'

Zytos approached Vulkan just before he left the room.

'Father?'

'Stay here, Barek. I have no need of protection aboard this ship.' He glanced at Gargo. 'See to Igen's arm. I will return shortly. And you are right,' he said, as the sound of Lumak's diminishing footsteps resounded from down the corridor.

'About what, father?'

'They are proud. So was my brother.' He looked sad. 'It will kill him in the end.'

Zytos frowned. 'It *will* kill him? The Gorgon is already dead.'

Vulkan didn't answer. He had left the room, his doleful footsteps merging with Lumak's.

Low light pervaded in the strategium, edging consoles and map tables in a thin pale outline.

A hololith slowly turned in the middle of the room, a war council stood around it, observing from four different angles.

Lumak entered first and joined his brethren, bringing Vulkan to stand with Meduson.

The Warleader scrutinised a star map, nebulas, moons and planets described in perfect monochrome, as though this were a translucent pict-cording frozen in stasis and replayed over and over. Meduson had one arm folded across his chest, the other rested upon it as he stroked the stubble on his chin.

‘What do you see, Lord Vulkan?’

‘I see ships,’ said the primarch.

Traitor vessels held station in the void, rendered up in the hololith like the celestial bodies: escorts, destroyers and cruisers, ships of the line anchored by much larger battleships.

‘Our augurs have detected several similar formations across this sector of space. This one is the largest.’

Vulkan’s eyes narrowed, slivers of embers in the strategium darkness. ‘They are hunting you, Meduson.’

‘Nothing new in that,’ Lumak said.

‘I’ve stung him,’ murmured Meduson, still scrutinising. ‘They are hounding, rather than hunting, though. Our escape routes are slowly being cut off.’

‘Are you seeking a way out of Tybalt Marr’s trap, or a means to bring about a confrontation with him?’

Meduson averted his gaze from the hololith to look at Vulkan. The Iron Hand appeared gaunt, even harrowed, partly on account of his injuries and augmetics, but Vulkan knew exhaustion when he saw it. After his victory in the auditorium, Meduson had been invigorated. The burden of command spared no one, however, and it evidently weighed heavy again.

‘Perhaps they are one and the same.’

‘Perhaps,’ Vulkan conceded.

He regarded the others: the bellicose Lumak, who would do anything to atone for his perceived failure of the Gorgon, a task made purposely impossible; a Clan Sorrgol captain, Mechosa – he who Vulkan had met when first coming aboard the *Iron Heart*, who clung to his duty even when it was an unsheathed sword cutting his bare hands; the silent Raven, Dalcoth, from a Legion most of the Iron Tenth had little love for; and brave, noble Nuros, who would humbly beseech Vulkan for a place by his side and be refused, never understanding why but blaming it on some hitherto unknown weakness of character he did not actually possess.

A ragged company stood before him, individually flawed but collectively stronger than their accumulated parts.

The room felt silent, filled only with the angry hum of the hololithic device, which spilled grainy grey light into the air and cast those present in stark relief.

Meduson walked the perimeter of the image, as if to examine the vast fleet of ships from every possible angle.

‘I am calling together an army. The largest gathering of Iron Tenth yet,’ he said,

regarding Vulkan keenly through the hololith. It painted his face in haunting shadows.

'Only the Iron Hands?'

'I am disbanding our coalition after this fight. The Raven Guard and Salamanders should return to their Legions. Defeating the Sons of Horus will make that possible.'

'As the reforging of the Tenth is made possible by your renewed alliance with the Iron Fathers.'

'I am the undisputed Warleader of the Iron Hands now. Aug sees that. So do the others. I have their unreserved support and word is spreading. Warriors flock to my banner. The Shattered Legion forces will be made whole.'

'And we must commit them now,' said Lumak, determined.

'And what of my sons?' asked Vulkan. 'How many serve in your alliance?'

Meduson's face darkened, but it was Nuros who answered.

'Only I and a handful of others.' He lowered his gaze, as if ashamed of what had become of the XVIII.

'Many left, or so I have been told by some of the other cells,' said Meduson. 'It is hard to get accurate numbers.'

'Recalled to Nocturne and Gereon Deep,' offered Nuros. 'I could reach neither.'

'Has any word been received from these expeditions?' Vulkan asked.

Nuros shook his head sadly.

Vulkan nodded solemnly. They were dead, then, in all likelihood.

'I mean to give purpose to those who remain. We will break the back of this fleet,' vowed Meduson.

'A strategic blockade,' said Mechosa, unnecessarily.

Vulkan chose to be gracious, giving the Clan Sorrgol captain a shallow nod.

'We cannot chart a course around, so we must go through,' Meduson told him.

'You want a fight, and will charge their guns gladly.'

'I want to return to the war – for the Gorgon's death to have meaning, instead of this unbearable weight it exerts upon us.'

Vulkan nodded. 'You are as prideful as he was.'

'Rather pride than ignominy.'

'It wasn't an insult, Meduson.'

Meduson ran his iron hand across his closely shaved scalp. He looked weary. 'I'm sorry. It has been a trying time for us. The stakes are rising with every battle. I cannot lose now. Too much depends on it. Too much depends on me. I will fight the Sons of Horus tooth for tooth. Not a raid this time – I'm not after

supplies. I want to kill them. Kill *him*. But I have to goad him. I have to unsheathe my blade first. This is war. I will not lie and claim that a primarch would not be significant in this fight. I realise you want to leave, that your path takes you elsewhere. But at least stand with us. Our task would be much easier with you by our side. It would galvanise the warriors.'

Vulkan regarded Meduson, as he knew they all regarded him, especially Nuros. He found much to like about the Warleader. Fearlessness he had like any of the Tenth – that came from his brother's influence – but his resolve and determination impressed Vulkan most. For a moment he considered it, the cause. He knew his sons had too.

He looked back at the hololith, at the massive fleet. An impenetrable veil of steel and adamantium. No gunship, however wily, could penetrate that.

'What is your answer, Vulkan?' asked Meduson. 'Now you have seen what I am trying to do, will you at least stand with us?'

'I cannot. Nothing has changed in that regard.'

'You refuse then?' said Meduson, frustration colouring his words.

'I cannot fight your war.' He glanced at Nuros, saddened by the disappointment in the Salamander's eyes, but resigned to his decision. 'Do not ask me again.'

Meduson raised a hand, notably the flesh and blood one. 'I meant no offence.'

'Then do not be offensive,' said Vulkan, consternation in his voice.

'I am not trying to be. I had hopes…'

'Do not cleave to them, Meduson, they reveal your lesser self. Those ships bar my passage as well as yours, in this we have an accord. I cannot breach the blockade. You know I need your help.'

'It is granted without reservation. I don't ask you to fight. I know you can't become embroiled in this. You have been clear about that. I simply ask you to be at my side when the fighting begins. Even your presence will make a great difference.'

Vulkan considered this. His heart yearned to bring battle to the Sons of Horus, having spent so long already out of it and in search of destiny instead. To do so would mean abandoning the greater cause, and he would not do that. He didn't like being used as a political tool either, even one in service to a noble aim, though perhaps that was a lesser concession.

'I'll stand with you until the ships are broken and lend whatever aid my presence affords, but once my way is clear, my sons and I will depart.'

Meduson nodded. 'Understood.'

'I know what you risk, Meduson. I'm not blind to it,' said Vulkan. 'But this

undertaking is one I cannot refuse.' He looked at Nuros. 'And something I must do alone.'

To his immense credit, Nuros said nothing. He merely held the primarch's gaze and Vulkan knew he had understood.

'I will get you through those ships,' said Meduson.

'Then I'll stand with you until you do.' Vulkan nodded to the others, and took his leave. Lumak made to accompany him back to his quarters.

'I can find my own way, captain. Please, I am sure the Warleader has much to discuss with you all.'

Lumak gave another shallow bow.

'Where will you go, Vulkan?' asked Meduson as the primarch was leaving the strategium. 'Beyond the blockade, where does your path take you?'

'Somewhere I have not been for a very long time, a place where I never thought I would return.'

He said nothing further, and left Meduson and his generals to their war.

EIGHTEEN

Iron hearts, iron heads

‘Have you slept?’

Gorgonson wore only half armour as he made an inventory of the medical supplies aboard the *Iron Heart*. They would be needed for what was coming. He looked up from his data-slate when an answer wasn’t forthcoming.

Meduson felt the Apothecary’s silent accusation without needing to see his disapproving face.

‘I have had no time for it. Run biometrics, you’ll see everything is fine.’

‘How long has it been?’ Gorgonson left the slate behind. The sterile air reeked of counterseptic and faintly of blood.

Meduson shook his head and frowned. ‘A few days, I think. A week. Possibly two. Run biometrics.’

‘I have,’ said Gorgonson, reaching for another slate. He had a stack of them to hand, not only concerning the status of supplies but also casualty reports and individual medical exams. He found Meduson’s.

‘This is your cerebrum,’ he said, showing Meduson an X-ray of his skull. Gorgonson had circled the brainstem. ‘Your catalepsean node is not intended to be used as a substitute for sleep, Shadrak.’

‘I am aware of its function, Goran.’

They sat together in a small archive room, an antechamber off the main apothecarion.

‘Your mind is sleep-deprived. The catalepsean shows signs of strain.’

Meduson raised an eyebrow. ‘I came here to ask for your thoughts about Aug, not for a medical assessment.’

‘Then you should not have agreed to meet in the apothecarion.’ Gorgonson put

the slate away. ‘Have you been seeing things, hearing things?’

‘I see and hear all the time. As Warleader, I must be attentive.’

‘Hallucinations, Shadrak,’ said Gorgonson, his tone chiding.

‘I know what you mean. No, nothing like that. I feel fatigued, yes. And I doubt I have slept since the muster began. Do you know how many ships we are now?’

Over the last two weeks, vessels had begun to gather. Meduson had given the command, and the Iron Tenth had heeded it. Warships of every kind arrived daily, some in ragged squadrons, some in impressively well-cohered fleets, others alone and glad to be allied to a larger force. The size and overall state of the ships varied greatly, but Meduson had welcomed them all. Refit and resupply, such as it was, had begun immediately.

They came together in sight of the Aragna Chain, a forbiddingly large asteroid field that stretched for thousands of kilometres across a third of the Vordral Sector. The names mattered little. Vordral had once been host to a cluster of industrial sub-type hive worlds called the Carthanons. Deemed alpha-class by Terra’s taxonomy cohorts, the Carthanonites had been proud and vehemently resisted subsummation into the Imperium.

It had been late in the Crusade, and the mission of compliance had fallen to the Iron Hands. Even then the Gorgon had no taste for diplomacy. The Carthanonites courted none. They responded with force. When their warships returned to them as broken husks, burning up in the hostile atmosphere of their worlds, the largest spearing continents and decimating populations with the furious violence of their re-entry, the Carthanonites realised victory laid far beyond their grasp.

Pride would not allow them to submit and fall upon bended knee to a potentate they had never met, and a black-armoured general whose authority they did not recognise. They sacrificed their own culture, choosing death over servitude to a distant and foreign power.

An atomic reaction, from warheads long stockpiled by a pan-planetary civilisation too afraid to unleash them and too belligerent to decommission them, tore apart the Carthanon worlds and left radioactive debris in its wake.

Meduson had been part of that campaign, brief as it was. He had witnessed the end of the Carthanons too, and the silent nuclear sunrises that dawned at the moment of their destruction, and then set swiftly afterwards.

‘*Futile*,’ the Gorgon had said afterwards. ‘*Utterly futile*.’

The profligacy of it all had offended him, the stupid and vainglorious pride of a culture too stubborn to admit when it was beaten.

Only now could Meduson properly understand why they had chosen

annihilation over capitulation. He briefly wondered if he would embrace the equivalent of that nuclear fire rather than submit. He told himself this was different. Being in the Aragna Chain brought back these memories. This and the prospect of the largest void battle he had every taken part in, let alone commanded, had kept him awake. Meetings with honoured lieutenants, battle-captains and, of course, the Iron Fathers had been ceaseless.

'I need only endure a little longer, Goran,' he said. 'Then I'll sleep. You have my word.'

'In answer to your question, Shadrak, I don't know precisely how many ships are in this armada, but I know you have responsibility for them, and for the souls aboard in their millions. A Warleader must sleep as well as strategise. Lean on Lumak or Mechosa. Hells, even bloody Dalcoth. But rest, or risk everything you have come so far to achieve.'

'I do nothing but weigh risk, brother. Aug is a risk, the other Fraters are a risk. I am willing to take every one, because I am freighting everything I have on this. Everything. I have ships to consider, troop dispositions, tactics, deployment. The Aragna Chain is immense, but even it can't hide a force of the size I command. Do you not think I realise what he's doing?'

'He's waiting for you.'

'He's waiting for me. Exactly. And that means he's confident. It means he has resources. I have what I have. It's a well-worn sword, I suppose. The blade is chipped in places, its edge is blunter than I would like but I will swing it anyway, and I will rain blow after blow down upon Marr's defence until either it or the sword breaks. One way or another, this ends. I'm willing to die for this – is he?'

'His death does not concern me,' said Gorgonson, irritated. 'Though your rhetoric is fine indeed. You should commit that to memory and give it in a speech to your captains when the time comes. But if you do not rest, if your judgement becomes impaired, you may not live to see who breaks first. And that is what *I* know.'

Meduson got to his feet, tired of the conversation now. 'I'll expect you with my command when the call to arms is made.'

Gorgonson nodded. 'Of course. Will you at least try to rest?'

'If it will cease your hectoring, yes.'

'It won't, but I appreciate it.'

'And Aug, your thoughts?'

Gorgonson shrugged. 'He is different.'

'Different? How?'

‘Colder, like a machine.’

‘We are all machine in part, brother,’ Meduson replied. He turned his bionic hand, watching the gears and servos work as the fingers curled and uncurled.

‘Yes, the flesh is weak,’ said Gorgonson, deliberately trite, and gestured to the main apothecarion beyond the archive room. Several Iron Hands lay in state on the numerous medi-slabs, yet to rise, perhaps never to rise. ‘No one knows that better than I. The Martians did something to him. I can’t find it. I’ve tried but nothing comes up in any examination I’ve made. It’s his mind that concerns me, not his flesh. Something happened to him.’

‘Could it be grief? For our fallen father?’

‘Perhaps. It takes something aberrant to fashion an effigy of a dead primarch and imbue it with false animus. They *believed* it was alive.’

‘They believed it was *him*. It gave me pause when I saw it, enthroned but concealed by its cloak and shadows.’

‘You wanted it to be true, but your rational mind rejected it as false.’

Meduson shook his head. ‘It wasn’t rationality. I *felt* it was wrong, by instinct. Metal is stronger than flesh, but it cannot replace it entirely. It cannot revivify the dead. It is hubris to believe otherwise. The Fraters succumbed to it.’

‘Then how do you explain the living, breathing primarch on board our ship?’

‘Vulkan? How so?’

‘He *died*, Shadrak. If you believe the rumours, he died more than once. The Salamanders left Macragge with a corpse.’

Meduson’s eyes narrowed. ‘You don’t trust he is what he claims to be?’

‘Oh, it’s him. You can’t fake something like that. It can’t be fashioned, not perfectly. I only ask how is he alive.’

‘I think Vulkan is more concerned with why.’

Gorgonson chuckled at that. ‘Do you know of any Salamander without existential concerns?’

‘Nuros?’

Gorgonson laughed loudly. ‘He has been on the *Iron Heart* too long.’

‘He’ll be here a while longer yet.’

‘Vulkan isn’t taking the Drakes with him?

‘Just his companions.’

Gorgonson didn’t question it, but it clearly surprised him.

‘I know neither why nor how Vulkan came back from the dead, or if he was ever dead at all,’ said Meduson. ‘I saw him destroy one of father’s arms. I saw that hammer fly into his grasp and indestructible silver turn to nothing with one

blow.’

‘They scavenged it?’

‘From Isstvan – they had to have done.’

Gorgonson looked horrified at the idea of such sacrilege, however nobly intended.

‘How long did they have it?’

‘Long enough to fashion it a body, to raise a cult in its honour. I suspect it began as a relic at first, a means of keeping our father alive in some necrotic way. Have you heard of the Keys of Hel?’

‘“They are the fires from the mountain. They are what should not and must not be,”’ said Gorgonson, reciting an old verse. ‘“Only in the last days of humanity, when law has no meaning, should any think to break the locks placed upon them.” It is the province of madmen,’ he added.

‘Cybernetic resurrection.’

‘You think Aug and the Fraters were trying to turn the Keys of Hel and use them to raise our father from the dead?’

‘At the root of it, perhaps. But rather than a body, they only had an arm, his hand.’

Gorgonson exhaled a shuddering breath, rubbing at his chin. His eyes briefly roamed somewhere faraway. ‘Have we become so desperate to turn to such things for answers? Duty ends in death.’

‘It failed, whatever it was. Vulkan ended it. I saw the realisation in Aug’s eyes afterwards at what they had done. Or tried to do. Desperation drives desperate acts. I believe he is contrite.’

‘I did not see it, so cannot judge. That, like so much else, falls to you, Shadrak.’ He pursed his lips. ‘He has changed, that’s all I can say for certain.’

‘The war has changed all of us, Goran. I can’t hold Aug to account for that.’

‘Then you have your answer.’

‘It seems I do.’

Meduson left the apothecarion to prepare for the battle. Sleep would have to wait. Aug would not.

The *Iron Heart* felt still despite the slow-burning engines vibrating through its hull. Its crew went about their duties with quiet diligence. Even its flesh-spare warriors kept to their quarters, leaving practice cages empty. Sword-halls filled with deafening silence.

Lumens flickered in the corridors, weak, stuttering.

The ship held its breath.

Only the servitors seemed unperturbed.

Meduson crossed one in a long ventral corridor, aft of the workshops – male, hairless, its skin bled of colour. It did not speak as it passed the Warleader, staring dully, slaved to its task. Belt-fed tracks had replaced its legs, grinding noisily against the deck, and it had industrial-grade clamps for arms. It carried cargo, a heavy-munitions crate bound for the mass-drivers below.

A premonition lingered in those soulless eyes, hard to deny. Meduson saw his own cold, dead visage reflected back at him.

Darkness fell as the lights went down for a few seconds, the ship's generators struggling to reignite them. A grey half-light returned in its stead, gritty and unclean. It painted Meduson's armour, stiff and heavy.

In the shadow light he saw Lumak, his skull clove in two, grimly lumbering towards him. Mechosa followed in his wake, burned half to hell, one foot scraping behind the other, dragging on broken servos. Then came Nuros and Dalcoth, horrifically transformed with pistons and bionic grafts. Dead and yet not dead, revenants both.

And finally he saw Aug, attended by a skeletal coven of his fellow Fraters, his jerky movements more akin to a machine than a man. Fate beckoned.

This is the will of iron, a voice uttered, mechanised and without emotion. Aug's and yet not Aug's.

He had become a machine, his blood turned to oil, his sinews to wire, his bones to steel, his eyes to burning diodes, his mind… his mind… Aug had none, only a logic engine, ever calculating, inured and unresponsive to the concepts of honour and brotherhood.

Cold metal fingers coiled slowly around Meduson's wrist, his arms, his torso, digging at his flesh, tearing and tearing, his skin stretching and splitting like rubber, until bloody steel gleamed underneath…

Meduson awoke, heart thundering, breath sawing asthmatically through his lungs. The servitor had moved on. He heard its metal-plated tracks rolling inexorably in the distance. The corridor remained, grim and only half-lit.

The lumens flared brightly again, scaring off the shadows. It hurt Meduson's eyes and he blinked, feeling the dry sting.

'Bio-scan,' he rasped, surprised at the hoarseness in his voice.

His armour complied, a data-screed unspooling on the slate built into his vambrace. Physiology within acceptable parameters, it said.

'Neurological.'

A second data-screed overlaid the first, the analysis cerebral/chemical. Beyond acceptable parameters, diagnosis suboptimal. Meduson shut it off. His heart and breathing had normalised. The internal chrono chimed on, measuring his sleep deprivation. He shut that off too.

He did not meet another soul after that, fictional or actual. The ship echoed like an empty tomb. Ahead, the workshops. Aug would be there.

The doors parted, offering no resistance, but they ground open slowly on protesting gears. Darkness reigned over light within, the latter provided by a sodium lantern suspended from the ceiling by a trail of thick wire. An entry corridor widened into an expansive work space, barren apart from a full-body armature holding up a largely unscathed suit of Legion war-plate. Aug's armour. The black lacquer shone where the light hit painted ceramite, and the white gauntlet icon across the left shoulder guard was unsullied. Aug had returned from Lliax pristine, strong. He cut an incongruous figure amongst the rest of the Tenth, battered and patched up as they were.

Present company included, Meduson thought.

'You look weary, Warleader,' a voice called from above.

Meduson looked up to a broad gantry, and the figure he hadn't noticed upon first entering the room. He pushed down a sense of disquiet at the uncanny timing of the question, and instead greeted his old friend.

'Hand Elect,' he nodded, smiling. 'Jebez. My brother.'

'I am glad to be thought of as such,' said Aug, partly obscured by the gantry mesh that separated them. 'Join me, Shadrak.'

Meduson took the metal stairway that led to the upper level gantry and Aug's actual workshop. His eyes widened as he reached the top of the stairs and saw what had become of his Hand Elect.

'Blood of Medusa…' Meduson could not help himself. He had not seen Aug without his armour since before Oqueth.

Scars ravaged much of Aug's body, the flesh that remained anyway. Metal dominated over skin. Most of his torso had been replaced, synthetic and augmetic organs visible through hardened, transparent plasteel. Both his right leg and arm articulated via gears, servos and pistons. Wires and tubing routed electrical impulses and fabricated machine-blood through a nervous system that had long lacked actual nerves.

'Gorgonson told me that the Martians had to rebuild from the core up, but I had not expected the grafts to be so extensive,' Meduson confessed.

Aug flexed his bionic arm, and its mechanisms growled, powerful, durable.

'As I said when I returned aboard the *Dannang*, Shadrak, I have been remade. Stronger than before, than I ever was in fact.'

'It is… a little disquieting.'

'Gruesome, I'll admit,' said Aug, and donned a robe to hide the worst of his patchwork body. 'What else did Goran tell you?'

'That I need more sleep.' Meduson examined a few of the pieces Aug had been working on. A finely wrought boltgun lay in pieces on his work bench, as well as a depowered axe, two monomolecular blades with one haft and several krak grenades.

Aug touched his bionic hand to Meduson's neck, who recoiled as he felt a tiny mechandendrite pierce his tough skin.

'Apologies, I should have asked first,' said Aug. 'I forget sometimes. The implants diminish social inhibition.'

Meduson rubbed at his neck. The pain was inconsequential. The act had surprised him.

'That might be wise.'

'So would be taking Goran's advice. I read increased levels of norepinephrine, serotonin and histamine. Allied to your obvious sleep deprivation, it could indicate a transient decrease in maximal cognitive performance, impaired executive and autonomic function, and pressure on both thalamus and prefrontal cortex.'

'You did all that just now?'

Aug nodded. 'It's not just my body that is stronger, Shadrak. My mind is too.'

'And I suppose this is to help occupy it?' Meduson gestured to the stripped down materiel on the bench.

Aug took the bolter as if to appraise it. 'A few modifications to improve damage, fire rate, efficiency.'

'And what of your *other* labour?'

Aug turned, eyes narrowed.

Meduson elaborated. 'The one Vulkan destroyed. What did you seek to improve with that?'

Aug's expression darkened.

'I honestly do not know. Kernag came to me at Lliax. He told me of the cult.'

Meduson's jaw clenched at the word, uttered without thought of its import.

'He said he could raise our father from the dead.'

'Such practices are forbidden, Aug. Not to mention impossible in the Gorgon's

case.'

Aug nodded, contrite. 'I am aware. I refuted him at first, disbelieving of his rhetoric and wary of rumours I had heard spoken amongst some Iron Fathers.'

'The so-called "Keys of Hel"?'

Aug nodded again. 'Perhaps my instincts had been dulled by whatever procedure I underwent at Lliax. It made me curious. Kernag showed me the silver hand. Something changed as I saw it. It is difficult to describe. It had animus, influence.'

'Are you saying it was alive?' asked Meduson, sceptical.

'In a manner of speaking. It had a vital spark.'

'You must have known it could never be our father. What Kernag did… Desecration does not even begin to describe it.'

'And yet, as we fashioned a body, the lie became harder to deny.'

'Had I refused to bend my knee to the reforged Iron Council, to acknowledge the golem you created in our father's image, what then?'

Aug lowered his gaze. 'I hoped it would not come to that. I hoped you would see reason.'

'Reason prevailed, greatly because of Vulkan's hammer. Had it not, you would have had to kill me, Aug. I will not yield, not now, not after all of this.'

Aug raised his eyes, so Meduson could measure them in his own. 'And are you here to kill *me*, Shadrak? As one old friend to another?'

Meduson slowly exhaled as if weighing the decision, though it had been made weeks ago in the ruined auditorium.

'No, never that. You swore to serve – you swore on my sword. I needed to be sure. I actually think I wanted to know why.'

'Something came back with the arm,' said Aug, that is all I can think of to explain it. 'Something beyond my understanding. I thought it to be the Gorgon's life essence, somehow alloyed to the metal, but now I know it was something *other*.'

'I don't pretend to know the secrets of the galaxy,' said Meduson. 'I am just a soldier. I had little to do with the Librarius before Nikaea, and even less now, though I have known some psykers. I believe in the existence of the uncanny. After the massacre, after we scattered, much later, I met a veteran who had been on Isstvan in the long aftermath. His name was Erasmus Ruuman, an Ironwrought. He spoke of things done on that cursed soil that defied reason, of totems of skulls, of crucifixions and the beseeching of elder gods in tongues that had no place in the mouths of men. Worse, he said the gods answered.

‘I have seen horrors, things anathema to mankind. I have felt them, Jebez. I never fought at Isstvan. I never set foot upon that bloody sand, but nothing good lingers in that place now. And even when all the warriors are dead, and the fortresses echo like empty tombs, the ghosts will remain. So perhaps something ill did invest itself within our father’s silver arm. We know so little of the metal’s provenance. It could be a conductor for such matter, but to acknowledge that would be to try to exert reason upon madness, and that I won’t do.

‘Our fate is easy to foretell. We stand as one, or we fall as many. The Legion must survive, brother. That is all.’

Meduson proffered his hand.

‘You want to fight, you’ll fight. I was wrong to keep you at arm’s length. I think I mistrusted what the Mechanicum had done to you. I think I had settled into a different regime that excluded you. I erred. I see that.’

Aug nodded and took Meduson’s forearm in a firm grip, and felt his forearm gripped in turn. He looked his old friend in the eye, gaze unwavering.

‘The Legion must survive.’

Meduson smiled warmly. ‘Then let us walk the storm.’

NINETEEN

A song of war, its opening verses

An unbroken phalanx of warships filled the oculus, looming, intimidating.

In ancient times, when mankind had yet to conquer the void and ventured across the oceans rather than the stars, great ships of oar and sail would blockade ports to prevent ingress or egress, thus denying escape or preventing reinforcement or resupply. To strike forth into the ready guns of a blockade took a strong-willed or insane captain.

Or a desperate one.

Standing on the bridge of the *Iron Heart*, Meduson wondered which he had become. The primarch watching silently from the shadows at the back of the bridge did not say. His eyes burned, though, as they set upon the traitors. Meduson did not need Vulkan's counsel, just his presence. If this victory was to mean anything, it had to come by the Warleader's hand and his hand alone.

A vast armada flew at Meduson's command, its ships filled with warriors ready to fight and die in his name.

Many would. The sheer number of the enemy's vessels, almost double Meduson's own, would see to that. His eyes narrowed, as if he could find a specific ship amongst the vast throng.

The *Lupercal Pursuivant*. Tybalt Marr's ship.

His iron fist clenched without him realising.

Celestial bodies turned slowly in the distance; stars burned in their death throes; nebulas reached across the dark like eruptions of iridescent cloud or erratic spillages of prismatic ink. Closer in, a terminator crossed the face of a world, the planet's surface lost behind cancerous yellow smog. Beautiful in its way, uncaring of the bloody slaughter to come.

‘Have you ever seen so many ships arrayed like that,’ murmured Mechosa.

He stood by Meduson’s side, the two Iron Hands the sole occupants of a forward dais offering an unparalleled vista beyond the *Iron Heart’*s forward-facing oculus.

At a distance of several thousand kilometres, the blockade of ships looked like a wall of sea-green iron floating menacingly in the void. The eye of Horus glowered from battle-hardened flanks, painted in night-black. The spikes of lance weapons jutted like needles, gun ports bristled, reactors and latent engine burn gave off a faint phosphorous glow.

‘It’s a war fleet, Mechosa, mustered to one end. To kill us,’ said Meduson. ‘All of us. They aren’t hunting us anymore.’ Despite Goran’s advice, he had failed to get any decent rest. Anger would have to reinvigorate him instead.

Mechosa scowled, his face obscured by fingers of darkness stretching across the bridge. ‘How like the Sixteenth to thrust their chins at us. Ever pugnacious are Horus’ thugs and gangsters.’

‘They are much more than that, I’m afraid,’ Meduson replied, alluding to the prowess and tactical acumen of the Legion. As they closed the distance between the fleets, approaching maximum weapons range, Meduson saw the gaps between the enemy vessels.

‘Enough room to turn,’ said Aug, from another station behind them, observing the opening dispositions of both fleets through the *Iron Heart’*s tactical hololith, ‘then unleash their broadsides. I see laser batteries, mass-drivers, macrocannons.’

‘A pretty mess they’ll make of us, I am sure,’ said Meduson. ‘How close?’

‘Less than five thousand kilometres.’

Meduson nodded, though his gaze remained on the oculus. He’d retire to the hololith soon, and join Aug, but for now he wanted to see this unfold with his own eyes.

‘Slow us down. All ships,’ he said, and the order quickly filtered through the chain of command.

Engines groaned and the strain placed upon the *Iron Heart* reverberated through its hull as the ship fought to arrest its momentum.

The bridge crew stood in silence as the ship grumbled around them. After several minutes, Meduson spoke again.

‘How far?’

‘Less than three thousand kilometres.’

‘All ships, all stop, but have the enginarium stand ready.’

Again, the order was relayed and met by a chorus of ‘aye, lord’ at each command juncture.

Again, the engines groaned and the hull lurched, a deep basso chime resonating dully across the decks. A low thrum rumbled throughout the ship, felt through armoured boots and bare feet alike as the *Iron Heart* entered a false hibernation.

Ratings and gun-loaders on the sprawling cannon decks came to a halt, ammo hoppers creaking ominously with their burdens; sweating menials paused in their labours, sweltering in the oppressive heat of the ship’s engines; pilots, human and transhuman alike, waited by their fighters yet to don their helmets; engineers looked up from their maintenance pits or stood holding refuelling hoses. Throughout every level, the crew slowed with their vessel and waited, eyes fixed upon the vox-horns.

Across thousands of kilometres of airless, featureless void the two fleets faced one another.

‘Is he there?’ asked Meduson, barely louder than a whisper.

Aug heard, but shook his head.

Meduson sneered, then sniffed his contempt.

‘A pity. It doesn’t matter. I’ll break his fleet and then I’ll come for him. Ships at the ready?’ he asked.

‘Awaiting your command, Warleader,’ answered Mechosa.

Meduson had planned; he had done so meticulously and predicated his tactics on facing a superior force to the one he possessed. He had contingencies for every conceivable scenario, his rigour and attention to detail ironclad. And yet, now the moment finally came, he felt the weight of decision upon him.

The Legion must survive…

‘First signal is given,’ he said. ‘Lumak, extend our traitorous cousins a warm greeting.’

The vox crackled across the bridge, briefly linking the *Iron Heart* with the *Gorgon’s Will*.

‘*If you mean kill them, then gladly, Warleader,*’ came a typically belligerent response from the captain of the Clan Avernii.

Meduson laughed. Some of the bridge crew smiled too. Levity was good – it would dull the mortals’ fear.

No laughter came from the back of the bridge and the looming figure there.

‘I do mean kill them, brother-captain.’

‘*Most egregiously, Warleader.*’

He cut the feed as the *Gorgon’s Will* moved to engage.

The laughter faded, replaced by a grim resolve.

'No turning back now,' muttered Mechosa.

'They die or we do,' said Meduson.

At the hololith, Aug failed to notice an errant muscle twinge below his eye. A relic of the flesh, anyone would assume if they saw it.

The ship resounded to the mustering of the Iron Tenth as they tramped towards the assault boats. Battered, but battle-hardened, a host of gunships, boarding craft and assault rams stood ready in their berths, attended by hordes of eager yet grim-faced crew.

Low light flashed in the gloomy launch bays, a flickering and silent alarm that painted the bulkheads crimson. The light turned grainy where it hit coolant mist or the pneumatic exhalations of depressurising blast doors.

Men and women in grubby overalls scurried before the warrior-kings in their midst, a sea of urgent grey parting to admit a spearhead of dour black, led by a captain who had seen more battles than most men had seen years.

Lumak of the Avernii had stern features like the crags of a weather-worn cliff, and held his chipped and dented battle-helm under his arm as he walked. The pommel of his Medusan zweihander protruded menacingly over his right shoulder, but he rested his free hand on the stock of an old sickle-magazined bolt pistol. Both venerable weapons, not unlike their wielder.

Those of the Tenth who served Lumak did not march alone. Over the long and bitter years following Isstvan, they had made strong and dependable allies. Fighting and dying together tended to forge powerful bonds.

Clad in emerald war-plate, draped in drakescale, the red-eyed devils were well known to the crew of the *Gorgon's Will*. They hefted saw-toothed axes, fanged pikes, spike-headed hammers and flanged maces, and carried boltguns of astonishing artistry. Dragon-mouthed flamers, their gilt frames ruddy in the light, appeared side by side with scalloped fire gauntlets and drake-headed plasma guns. Their bearers smiled and nodded as they passed amongst the crew, so unlike their iron-wrought brethren in funerary black.

Their father had returned, a patriarch thought long-dead, now fighting alongside them for one last battle. One of the Drakes began to sing, and though neither Medusan nor the Iron Hands Terran knew the language, they felt the unyielding strength of the words. Spear hafts and axe pommels beat against combat shields and breastplates as the Salamanders made their own music, a tribal refrain of Nocturne, a fable of fire. Though few, their passion and vigour enhanced their

meagre numbers.

The rhythmic tattoo grew louder as the ships grew nearer, until it reached a bellowing crescendo. Silence crashed in its wake. War called and none could vie with its song.

Ramps lowered on protesting hinges, but only a few needed the encouragement of a heavy wrench or hammer to open. Fuel pipes were coiled and ferried away by efficient crewmen. The fog of preparation faded, revealing the battered flanks of gunships eager for cargo.

The legionaries began to form boarding squads, seeking out their assigned ships from a predetermined roster. Not enough Drakes remained aboard the *Gorgon's Will* to warrant their own vessel, so they had to share another's.

'Rather overfond of wailing, you Nocturneans,' said Lumak. 'What did you sing about?' He had come to a halt so he could speak with his old sparring partner, both inside and outside the battle cages.

Urging his warriors to go in his stead, Nuros came to talk to the Iron Hand.

'I sang of the unflinching resolve of our Medusan brothers,' he declared boldly, 'and how the metal staves you have all sat upon will be difficult to remove.'

Lumak said nothing, his face a mask of resolve. It lasted a few seconds before it cracked, and the Avernii captain roared with laughter. He laughed so hard, he clutched his side and tears welled in his eyes. Several of the crew turned at the sudden commotion, wearing confused expressions.

It took almost a minute for Lumak to recover his composure, but when he did he clapped Nuros' arm in a fierce grip, his eyes like flint again as he held the Salamander's fiery gaze.

'A strange time to discover levity, iron brother,' said Nuros.

'It feels auspicious,' Lumak replied, revealing another crack in his steely facade as he smiled. 'And I am glad this bad blood is behind us.'

A shadow flickered across Nuros' face but quickly faded again.

'I keep my anger for our enemies, iron brother. I should not have doubted you or Meduson.' He looked up at the craft idling in its berth, a beaten-up old Thunderhawk, its toothy prow stripped down to gleaming silver. 'That is an ugly boat. Are we certain it won't spring a leak once underway?'

Lumak regarded the ship. 'Not remotely. I don't think it wants to die easily, though, if that's any reassurance.'

'Stubborn,' said Nuros, nodding.

'They'll have to kill it piece by piece.'

'Yes, they will, iron brother,' said Nuros, no longer looking at the ship but at his

friend.

Lumak released him from his grip.

‘I hope it’s glorious.’

Nuros grinned, the crescent of pearly-white stark against the onyx-black of his skin.

‘Perhaps it will be worthy of a song.’

In the background, the last of the boarding squads had almost embarked. A legionary in coal-black war-plate handed the captain a breacher shield on his way to the Caestus.

Nuros glanced over Lumak’s shoulder.

‘Is that sword of yours still going to be unremembered?’ he asked.

Lumak scowled. ‘This again… I yearn for death,’ he said, turning and setting foot on the ramp, ‘if it means an end to your ceaseless nagging.’

Nuros followed close behind. He stooped into the tight confines of the troop hold, lowering a grav-harness across his shoulders and chest. As the engines trembled, a low rumble presaging a much louder roar, he turned his head slightly, just enough so Lumak could see the many honour scars branded into the side of his face.

‘What about *Wrath? Wrath* is a good name.’

As the Thunderhawk stirred, warning klaxons began to wail and drowned out Lumak’s colourful reply.

A flotilla of ships surged across the void, engines at maximum burn. They had broken off from the extreme left flank of the Iron Tenth’s formation and were anchored by the cruiser *Gorgon’s Will*, a veteran of countless engagements. A survivor of Isstvan, her hull etched with scars, the *Gorgon* had a belligerent spirit eager for retribution.

Silent lance fire erupted from Sons of Horus warships as the *Gorgon’s Will* closed to within range. The barrage of concentrated las-beams flared brightly as they struck shields. A tempest raged across the forward arc of the Iron Hands ship and the vessels who flew at her side. Short-lived flashes of dissipating energy bloomed with every incandescent impact.

The *Gorgon’s Will* was the bleeding edge of a charge, her prow angled like a spear, sallying forth to probe the edges of the blockade.

Slowly, she pulled ahead of the other ships, feeding power to her defences and engines, saving nothing for the guns. The *Saurod* and two massive junkers, the *Ser Barnabus* and *Rennard Maximal*, flew directly in her wake, shuddering with

engine strain, held together only by willpower and the profusion of iron armouring their flanks.

Two others cruisers, the *Unyielding Glory* and *Ferrum Unbowed*, flew to the *Gorgon'*s port side, as hoary as the old ship for which they played outrider. They were followed in turn by the frigates *Bellicose* and *Karaashi*. The vessels moved forwards in an oblique line, offering a refused flank to the enemy and close enough that their shields overlapped one another in protective concert.

The flotilla closed and the fury of the enemy's guns redoubled. Torpedoes surged into the night-black of space, a deadly flock charged with dismantling the *Gorgon'*s obstinate resistance. A second array of torpedoes pursued the first, corkscrewing in the void, bleeding contrails of propellant gas. Ship killers flew in the wake of shield breakers, only seconds apart.

Flak turrets on the *Gorgon's Will* answered, turning and auto-targeting with precision, stitching a rapidly propelled cannonade across the gulf between the ship and the arcing ordnance coming to end her. A rash of explosive detonations signalled the turrets' success, a short-lived firestorm starved of oxygen and quickly extinguished.

The *Gorgon* and her allied warships launched missiles in response, a plasma payload meant to irritate rather than cripple. Struck shields flared amongst the Sons of Horus vessels, sections of their aegis made briefly visible by the impacts, but no discernible damage was caused.

Frustrated by the enemy's refusal to die, several Sons of Horus ships had begun to come about, edging forwards and committing to the turn to bring their more numerous and powerful broadsides to bear. Laser batteries glowed as they built to optimal charge, and heavy macrocannons emerged from gun ports. Urgency spoke of desperation in the Sons of Horus fleet, as the Iron Hands took every punishment meted out but kept on coming. Slowly but inevitably, a boarding action loomed.

Meduson watched in silence through the oculus, a statue wreathed in shadow on the forward command dais of the *Iron Heart'*s bridge. Mechosa had returned to his station by the helm, while Aug relayed updates via the tactical hololith.

'Shields on the *Gorgon's Will* are diminishing rapidly,' he said.

'She can take it,' Meduson replied.

'At this rate, I estimate a total collapse in under five minutes.'

'She can take it.'

The *Gorgon's Will* ploughed on in the face of unrelenting punishment, but

Meduson had his eye on the rest of the blockade. As he watched, the oculus pushed to maximum magnification, he saw the pale glow of engine ignition.

'I read engine signatures from further down the blockade,' said Aug.

Meduson nodded, his face a mask of cold determination.

'Engage plasma drives, but keep it at a crawl.'

As the lonely flotilla further distanced itself from the greater concentration of Iron Hands ships, proximate vessels in the blockade started to break position, too far away to strike at the core of the Iron Hands fleet, but close enough to its impudent vanguard to warrant a response. Six Sons of Horus ships decided to engage. Led by the *Potentate*, they pulled away from the other renegade vessels and burned towards the oblique line of cruisers and frigates shielding a battered ironclad and two junker escorts.

Searing lance beams lashed out from these chasing ships. Shield arrays on the distant *Bellicose* and *Karaashi* flickered but held, forcing the Sons of Horus ships in the hunting pack to come closer to enhance the potency of their forward guns.

The blockade ships in direct opposition to the Iron Hands vanguard burned their engines hard to expedite their turns, engaging in a slow and synchronised ballet. Their forward guns fell silent as broadsides were made ready.

As the *Gorgon's Will* came within assault range, its prow-mounted macrocannons opened up and raked the flanks of a vessel designated the *Luna Scion.* The *Scion'*s shields capitulated quickly against the sustained barrage of heavy ordnance, and chunks of armour sheared off, spilling loose into the darkness. A premature broadside from its laser batteries spat out in retaliation, but over half the blasts missed their target. The shields on the *Gorgon* weathered the hasty salvo, and it opened its launch bays under the cover of the flaring energy blooms. A host of assault boats disgorged into the void, flying under the shields to attack the *Luna Scion'*s ventral aspect as the *Gorgon* dramatically reduced power to its plasma drives and fed everything it had into its forward defences.

The *Unyielding Glory* and *Ferrum Unbowed* surged ahead, closing the gap to the *Gorgon* and releasing an arsenal of cluster bombs against the *Revenger*, *Horus Triumphant* and *Spear of Conquest,* which were ranked up alongside the *Luna Scion.*

Gun ports lit across the flanks of the three ships as laser batteries and macrocannons combined in a fearsome broadside that simultaneously tore apart

the cluster bombs and hammered the *Gorgon*. Noiseless explosions rippled across the void. Overwhelmed, the *Gorgon*'s shields trembled and then collapsed in a violent flash of magnesium light.

At the same time, the *Bellicose* and *Karaashi* decelerated hard, leaving a breach in the line for the two junkers to exploit.

The *Potentate* and the other flanking Sons of Horus ships speared through the dark, blind hunters with a scent of prey, intent on reaching the *Bellicose* and *Karaashi*. As the two frigates peeled off from the attack, the renegades gave chase, ignoring the unarmed junkers.

The flare of shield detonation faded, revealing the *Gorgon's Will* alive but scathed, its forward armour black and buckled. Energy crackled in the hollows of its wounds, illuminating ugly but largely superficial damage.

As the *Gorgon's Will* retreated to reignite its shields, the *Unyielding Glory* and *Ferrum Unbowed* took the fore, paired lance strikes gouging the stricken *Luna Scion* and interrupting its counter-barrage. A fatal blow took the vessel amidships, its shields already diminished and unable to do more than flicker weakly against the Iron Hands' savage guns. A plosive but brief gout of fire billowed from one of the *Luna Scion*'s gun ports. A burst of secondary explosions followed, racing down the ship's starboard side and tearing a gaping rent in its armour.

A second punitive barrage from the *Unyielding Glory* ended it, gutting the *Luna Scion* and provoking a reactor overload that ripped it and the *Revenger* apart.

As a nuclear sun dawned, the *Potentate* and its hunters were bearing down on the *Bellicose* and *Karaashi*. Heedless of the junkers, the warships launched torpedoes at the *Karaashi*, tearing away its shields and destroying one of its main engines. The frigate fell back sharply from the *Bellicose*, limping and beleaguered.

Reeling from the catastrophic death of the *Luna Scion*, the *Horus Triumphant* was still struggling to reignite its shields when a boarding party struck deep into its enginarium.

A ragged hole yawned in the flank of the *Horus Triumphant*, venting pressure and the bodies of its hapless mortal crew. Fire guttered, slowly choking. Sirens wailed, deafening but impotent. Pipes ruptured, unable to take the strain, flash-freezing crewmen, who found their lungs filled with liquid coolant before they could even scream. Their bodies soon hardened to glittering, icy husks.

Lumak ignored the mortals, their presence as inconsequential as the debris

rattling against his armour in the cold darkness beyond the breach. Instead, he drew his sidearm and gave the order to advance.

Darkness fell as power in the breached section failed. Helm lumens snapped on, strafing an expansive chamber. Bodies drifted, colliding serenely, their frozen grimaces anything but peaceful. Gantry chains hung still, icicles with cores of iron. Only cargo strapped down or bolted to the deck remained in place. Everything else had spewed from the ship, its guts violently expelled from its critical wound.

Lumak reached the first bulkhead, a half-metre-thick reinforced blast door, and ushered forward two of his kinsmen bearing plasma-cutters. Light flared, cold and contained in the darkness.

The other Iron Hands raised a shield wall, facing the breach.

'I don't think they'll be coming from that way,' Nuros said over the vox.

His Drakes looked to the bulkhead, their toothy war-helms glowering with apparent disapproval.

'I've been stabbed in the back once too often to be complacent,' Lumak replied.

Nuros nodded, the movement slow with the absence of gravity. 'Hard to argue against that, iron brother. Though I fear we might die of old age before the traitor's knife kills us.' Nuros gestured to one of his warriors, who thumped a fist against his fire-blackened breastplate and brandished an ornate pike forged of deep red metal.

'Have your men stand aside, iron brother,' said Nuros.

Lumak turned, his helm's faceplate lit by the pale glow of the toiling plasma-cutters.

'Let Umendi demonstrate the strength of Nocturnean steel.'

Lumak gestured, and the two Iron Hands withdrew.

Umendi engaged his pike, and the faint red crackle of a disruptor field suddenly wreathed the blade. A single thrust pierced the bulkhead, parting metal like flesh. With the blade still embedded, he cut across a diagonal, first up and to the right, then down. As Umendi wrenched the pike loose and stepped back, a triangular glow faded where the metal had been cut through.

'And?' asked Lumak.

Nuros cocked his head slightly. 'And I cannot do everything, iron brother.'

Lumak gave a small shake of the head. 'Velig, Kurnox!'

Two Iron Hands advanced on the bulkhead and struck it with their breacher shields like a battering ram where Umendi had made the cut.

After three blows, a large section of the bulkhead fell inwards, opening up the

ship beyond.

'Take the vanguard,' said Lumak, and Velig and Kurnox entered the breach.

About to follow, the Avernii captain felt a hand on his shoulder.

'Your gratitude is appreciated but unnecessary, iron brother,' said Nuros.

Lumak scowled behind his war-helm. '*I need to kill something…*'

A second bulkhead door slammed down behind them cutting off their escape.

'Don't worry, iron brother,' said Nuros as angry shouts echoed from deeper in the ship. 'Something has come along.'

The ironclad *Saurod* closed on the *Spear of Conquest.* The cruiser had been joined by four other Sons of Horus vessels in an effort to overwhelm the *Unyielding Glory* and the *Ferrum Unbowed,* which were running rampant in the wake of the *Luna Scion'*s destruction. But as the reinforcements closed, both the *Unyielding Glory* and the *Ferrum Unbowed* slackened off their plasma drives and began to lag behind the bullish *Saurod*.

All weapons fell upon the ironclad and tore it apart, piece by piece, but like an ageing pugilist too stubborn to fall, the vessel kept on coming.

On the *Iron Heart*, Meduson resisted the urge to punch the air. Corpses of renegade ships littered the void, listing dangerously into the paths of their comrades.

The Sons of Horus held, but their right flank was in disarray. Gaps appeared in the blockade, but the rest of the fleet would soon fill them if the Iron Tenth committed everything now.

As the *Saurod* charged towards certain death, and the junkers rattled within range of the *Potentate*, Meduson uttered two words that would shatter the right flank completely.

'Aug… *Forgebreaker*.'

The *Saurod'*s skeleton crew of servitors came to an abrupt halt, frozen in their duties. Dull-eyed and slack-witted, they had no concept of the volatile and explosive cargo that filled the echoing hangars of the ship. They knew only the imperatives given to them by their iron master.

Slaved to a monotonous existence, some since the early days of the Crusade, none amongst the lobotomised wretches would ever know the importance of their sacrifice. No one would mourn them, because in truth they had died a long time ago. Only the ship would be remembered, its name forever etched in history.

Alert sirens began to sound across the bridge, but no one heard them. Red flaring light stained it from within, but no one saw it. Stood erect at their stations, the servitors enacted their final task with curious dignity. An automated voice called out the last seconds of the *Saurod*'s proud existence, a diminishing sequence that ended in annihilation.

A massive explosion erupted across the *Iron Heart*'s oculus as the *Saurod* self-destructed, followed moments later by the *Ser Barnabus* and *Rennard Maximal*. Every incendiary Meduson could spare had been packed into the gaping holds of those three vessels, his hope that they would be ignored by the renegades in the cut and thrust of fighting warships with teeth.

'But you missed the hammer, didn't you?' he murmured to himself.

In the days of sail when men still plied the oceans, old sea captains had a name for sacrificial vessels whose holds were crammed with barrels of gunpowder. They called them 'fireships' and sailors rightly feared them.

With decks eerily deserted, their timber frames were set aflame and the blaze would carry onto any enemy ships that strayed too close. In turn, the fire would spread to other vessels and set them ablaze too before reaching the stores of gunpowder…

In such a way blockading vessels around a port or island could be breached, and escape or relief bought for the sacrifice of a single ship.

Ships of the void did not burn like the man o' wars of old, but the tactic of a fireship still had merit.

As the explosions faded, wreckage drifted in their wake. A host of Sons of Horus warships had been crippled or destroyed utterly. A gaping rift yawned in the blockade wall.

'All ships to engage,' said Meduson, eyeing the debris fields with grim satisfaction. This had been coming for a long time, ever since the Gorgon fell, though none would have known it back then. Most of the Iron Tenth hadn't made it to Isstvan; they either died in orbit or were forced to turn back, chased by news of catastrophic defeat. A prideful Legion had been humbled, brought lower than they could have imagined possible. They knew of only one way to reclaim their dignity and honour. Fail at this and the Iron Hands would be no more. Death would be preferable.

'No more hiding,' muttered Meduson as alert klaxons sounded and the shields shimmered in readiness for the fury to come.

He remembered Aug's words.

The Legion must survive.

'Warleader,' Mechosa spoke up, prompting Meduson to turn his head, but as he did so and his gaze took in the bridge behind him, he knew what the Clan Sorrgol captain had been about to say.

Vulkan had gone.

TWENTY

The alien prince, reposed in his arrogance

The alien prince basked in the light of a dying sun.

He had come to the temple to venerate the gods, and gave obeisance in the shadow of a statue carved in the likeness of such a deity. He knelt in a great crimson pool, the liquid too thick and too dark to be wine. It ran off the statue in slow, shining rivulets, from invisible pores in the stone, and caught in a shallow basin below. A faint but palpable heat haze trembled off the placid meniscus of the pool.

The temple was a cold and echoing place of pale stone, its columns threaded with softly glowing runes. They reminded the alien prince of his purpose, his path and so in turn he considered the path of the universe.

He and a cohort of others, a Cabal, knew war would consume the galaxy. They desired to avert this fate and engineer another in its stead. This required reach. It also required conspirators aligned to the very race the Cabal needed to sacrifice, in order to prevent the dissolution of the galaxy by ancient and primordial gods.

Mankind.

Mankind and all its grubby, petty, self-interest. Its mortality. Its endless clamouring for more, for meaning, for purpose… All of it had to end.

Mankind must die, an offering to sate old gods whose voracious soul hunger would see them gorged unto extinction. The alien prince found the word ‘old’ amusing in this context, for he had witnessed the Fall and in turn experienced the true horror of what had been birthed in its aftermath.

Even thinking on it, cloistered in the temple, his guard nearby, forced his hand to the shimmering stone he wore around his neck.

She Who Thirsts would devour all their souls, unless…

Yes, he thought, *mankind must perish*. Thus would the other races of the galaxy endure, while mankind was discarded as befitting its status – a mistake, an embarrassing footnote.

Though the alien prince hated consorting with any mon-keigh, let alone a degenerate human, he recognised their uses and knew how easily they could be exploited. A creature such as he took immortality for granted, but these *humans*… They craved life and would do anything to perpetuate it.

How irksome, then, to have learned that one he thought of a similar mind, if not an ally as such, had turned his back on the great cause to embrace another.

'And you are sure?' he asked, in a richly cultured voice.

The messenger bowed, so low his pointed chin almost touched the floor.

'Gahet is dead?'

The messenger bowed lower still, his garish attire and flamboyant theatrics at odds with the solemnity of the temple.

The alien prince half turned his head. He was naked but for the loincloth around his waist. He also radiated threat and not merely on account of the blood that swathed his lean and muscular body. His eyes narrowed, alighting on the messenger's upraised finger.

'Not just Gahet…'

The finger turned into a thumb.

'Is he coming for me?'

A vigorous nod confirmed it, the messenger yet to rise.

'Stand, klown. I am not your audience.'

A euphonious voice answered.

'I await your applause, my prince.'

'I am not your prince, either.'

'You are Slau Dha,' said the messenger, as if that were answer enough, and raised his head.

A perfect white mask as smooth as polished bone and as thin as porcelain obscured his face. A sculpted brow and sickle grin gave the wearer a permanently jovial expression, at odds with the horns and the three tears of blood painted across the left cheek.

He wore a long black coat, its lining bright and many-hued. His boots had pointed toes, his diamond-patterned leggings were green and red. A motley fellow indeed.

Slau Dha murmured words of worship to the Bloody-Handed God, rose to his feet and stepped from the shallow pool. 'That I am,' he said, 'and now a seer

shall end my reign.'

He beckoned to his guard, a fearsome warrior in segmented black carapace and plumed war-helm.

'Ready my ship.'

Beyond a glassless arch lay a paradise, a lush green utopia fashioned by the eldar before the Fall. Slau Dha knew it as *Lilaethan*, a maiden world, once regarded as a great hope by his race. That all ended with the Fall, and so pragmatism had taken the place of dreaming. As he stood before the arch, considering all that had been lost, Slau Dha noticed his guard had yet to move.

Still hot from his oaths to Khaine, slayer of Eldanesh, Slau Dha gave a bark of anger.

'Are you deaf, servant?' he asked.

A smile pulled at Slau Dha's lips as he regarded the guard in black.

'Oh, that's good,' he said. 'That's very, very good.'

Slau Dha barely moved, save to speak, but he felt his limbs tauten in readiness to act.

He gestured to the shadows behind the guard in black, to a second figure that loomed by the edge of a column. Two interlopers breaching the sanctuary of the temple? It was unheard of.

'I know how *you* got in here,' he said, referring to the guard, 'but I am impressed you got *that* in as well. Disgusted, but impressed.' He frowned. 'Actually, revolted. You are a traitor to me and your entire race.'

The guard stepped forwards, unbuckling his breastplate with one hand and reaching for his helm with the other. As the armour came away, it faded, turning gossamer-thin until only a seer in the black robes of Ulthwé remained.

Eldrad Ulthran blinked, his azure eyes curious as they regarded Slau Dha. He raised his hand the merest fraction, a half-gesture, nothing more.

'Leashing your hound?' said Slau Dha. 'That's wise.'

'Says the half-naked eldar prince without his sword.'

'I don't need my sword to kill you, farseer. Taking your life with my bare hands would be more satisfying, for one thing.'

'Then why don't you?'

'At least you have the decency to come here unmasked.'

'I wanted to look you in the eye as you died, Slau Dha.'

Slau Dha faced the arch again, enjoying the last of the sun, closing his eyes as it touched his ruddy skin.

'Intriguing. Such anger…' He looked askance at the seer. 'Are you sure you

tread the right path, Eldrad Nuirasha?'

'Needs abide in this case.'

'Oh yes?'

'I cannot tolerate genocide, Slau Dha. This scheme of the Cabal's must remain unfulfilled.'

The prince gritted his teeth in anger, though he took care to do nothing further.

'You would place the mon-keigh, their lives, their continued existence, above that of your own people?'

'I am referring to our people. The Primordial Annihilator cannot be undone by sacrificial offering. It must be fought. Alas, we have shown a spectacular lack of resolve in this regard and our strength is not what it once was. Mankind, however, is young…'

'A plague that feeds the greater disease!'

'And what did we do but give birth to a facet of it, or is that stone around your neck an affectation only?'

Slau Dha touched the spirit stone, suppressing a mental shudder at the thought of what would happen were he ever to be separated from it.

'So why come, Eldrad?' he asked. 'You must know the peril you are in just by being here. How did you even find me? How did you find any of us?'

'Fate revealed it to me, just as it has revealed what I must do to bring about the survival of mankind.'

'And the slow, lingering death of a universe condemned to depravity and damnation.'

'It can be saved.'

'And can I, *kinsman?*'

'I do not believe you want to be.'

Slau Dha sneered. 'The revelation of fate again…'

'Actually, on account of your arrogance and belligerence.'

'And you expect me to believe my death serves these ends?' Slau Dha gave a snort of contempt. 'You are a coward, farseer, hiding murderous intent behind an altruistic facade.'

'Perhaps, but that is for me to know alone.'

'And the men and women you have killed, the agents slain by the hand of the beast you ally yourself with…' Slau Dha spared a curt glance to the shadows and the unmoving statue lurking there. 'What of them?'

'I think you are stalling, autarch,' said Eldrad, taking another forward step and gently wrapping his fingers around the grip of his witchblade.

‘I am, but answer me anyway.’

The statue stirred, as if sensing an end to the conversation.

‘I need to see,’ said Eldrad. ‘I am searching for a particular soul. Fate is obscured around him.’

‘A human soul?’

‘Profoundly so, and yet entirely not.’

Slau Dha scowled. His sword rested in the lee of the statue, laid reverently upon a sash of red velvet. ‘If I craved riddles, I would summon a Harlequin for my pleasure.’

Eldrad glanced at the statue of Khaine and then back to the blood-stained prince.

‘I suspect your pleasures are less whimsical and more visceral, Slau Dha.’

‘Oh, they are,’ he said, his low voice thick with menace. ‘But allow this final indulgence, a last curious inquiry. This soul, it eludes you then?’

‘I cannot see it. Yet. But the skeins are unravelling now. It won’t be long before I know what needs to be done.’

‘Ah,’ said Slau Dha, a smile of revelation curling his lips, ‘hence the human chattel.’

‘Yes, you have made them your slaves, haven’t you?’

‘And I would do so again.’

‘You’re not getting that chance, autarch.’

‘Oh, I think I might.’

‘And why is that?’ asked Eldrad, unsheathing his sword. Psychic lightning coursed down its edge and snaked along the runes etched into the blade.

‘Because you are not the only one who has seen the future. I have *friends* too…’

A cloud of myriad colours manifested around Slau Dha, kaleidoscopic at first but slowly resolving into a band of masked figures in long coats and motley garb. Each carried a pistol and a blade, their design exotic but not unfamiliar, and saluted the seer in eerie and mocking unison.

The foremost, a lithe figure with a grotesquely grinning mask that had three teardrops down the left cheek, sketched the most profound bow before regarding his prey. His eyes shimmered playfully with the prospect of imminent violence.

‘*Enter the heroes,*’ he said, in a ludicrously grandiloquent voice, and then in a harsher, entirely more menacing fashion, ‘Shall we begin?’

TWENTY-ONE

Fire and iron, tempered

Blistering las-fire ripped between the two fleets, turning night to day or some actinic version of it. Shields flickered psychedelically to the relentless volleys of cannons and torpedoes. Armour cracked as shields surrendered and broke apart, leviathan warships shedding their scales as they bled out into the endless darkness.

Battleships and escorts, nimble destroyers and diminutive fighters engaged as two Legions fought across a vast gulf of space, fuelled by mutual hatred and an unquenchable desire to kill one another.

Losses had been sustained on both sides, but the vessels in black livery daubed with the icon of a white gauntlet had the better of it. Slicks of fuel and coolant smeared the void, reminiscent of blood. Ships hung open, cold carcasses riddled by rotting wounds. Bodies drifted in frozen, aimless, shoals. Debris gathered, colliding and agglomerating, a nascent graveyard of vessels that stretched for thousands of kilometres.

The Sons of Horus burned, and Meduson grimaced in private catharsis at the sight.

The *Iron Heart* trembled with the sound of its heavy guns. Mass-drivers spoke with thunder, sending noiseless fury into the void.

A collimated lance strike from the *Morlock*, *Sturmdrang* and *Ironhelmed* speared the renegade ship *Bloody Victory* through its magazine. Its depleted shields offered scant resistance, its battered armour even less. Something detonated within the *Bloody Victory*, evidenced by the titanic shudder that briefly took the hull. It limped on for a few moments afterwards, though made no attempt to attack, before its starboard engines erupted in flame. The fire died

almost instantly, but not before a chunk of the ship broke away, sheared off by whatever calamity had occurred on board. Crippled, the *Morlock* gave it another concentrated volley and the *Bloody Victory* was no more.

Meduson clenched his fist as he witnessed the ship's demise – not in triumph, he was wise enough to know they were a long way from that yet, but simply because he had to do something with the tension.

'Another put to the sword,' said Mechosa from the helm, in a self-satisfied way Meduson found distasteful and ignoble.

He left his feelings unremarked, his own confused on the matter. Vulkan had demonstrated his, though. The primarch had played his part. Meduson could not worry about his departure now. Enough already demanded his attention.

As the Iron Tenth had closed in earnest, hundreds of boarding actions took place across the two fleets. Aggression would serve Meduson well now. He needed to strike, and strike hard whilst the Sons of Horus struggled to regather and counter. The *Saurod* and the two junkers it had been escorting had hurt them. It was arrogance, Meduson realised. The Sons of Horus thought themselves preeminent, inviolable.

How easy to empathise with that, he thought.

How much easier to believe it. Harder to bear was the humbling that came after, and the denial that hubris had anything to do with it.

'The Gorgon sends his regards,' Meduson murmured, a knot of cold spite forming in his gut that made him a hypocrite when he considered Mechosa's words again.

Another volley sounded from the mass-drivers. Shield flare briefly obscured the oculus – a desultory blow, nothing more.

Sons of Horus died in the night-black, trapped in their iron coffins, nothing to do with all their arrogance and superiority. And Meduson forced himself to confront a fact, if silently.

I don't need a primarch to win this war…

'Warleader,' said Mechosa, that prideful conceit colouring his tone again, 'the enemy is retreating!'

Through the oculus, Meduson could see a large proportion of the renegade ships had begun to withdraw.

'Aug?' asked Meduson, his eyes narrowing but failing to discern further detail.

'They are pulling back to extreme range.'

'And from there?'

'They'll be restricted to lances and torpedoes, but at such distance efficacy will

be severely reduced.'

'So, no threat?'

'Minimal, Warleader. It could be a trap.'

'Then we'll exercise due caution.'

The faint stars of warning shots flickered in the distant darkness, growing brighter, but an insignificant threat, as Aug had predicted.

'Should we re-engage?' asked Mechosa, eager.

'That's the opposite of caution. Our father's wrath overspills into your humours, brother,' said Meduson, and the Sorrgol captain bowed his head a fraction.

'We should dismantle the rest of the renegade ships in this engagement,' said Aug, 'and then turn our attention to the greater fleet.'

'Agreed.'

A sizeable host of vessels still awaited them in the deeper void, in retreat, bloodied certainly, but not without threat. That the Sons of Horus had divided their forces made the Iron Tenth's task easier, but not a foregone conclusion.

The shields briefly flared again, untroubled.

'Death throes…' said Meduson, and knew he could finish the renegades abandoned by their comrades. 'Recall our boarding parties,' he decided. 'Tell them to cause as much damage as they can and then make egress immediately. We can finish this at range.'

Aug spoke up. 'Lumak and Nuros claim they are nearing the bridge of the *Horus Triumphant*.' As well as manning the hololith station, he also routed all vox-traffic through his helm, subconsciously listening for any chatter of import.

'Should they withdraw, Warleader?' Aug asked.

Meduson allowed a feral smile onto his face. 'Let Lumak take it,' he said proudly. 'We'll have the ship for our own.'

An explosion lit the spinal artery of the upper deck of the *Horus Triumphant*, first quarter, command section.

Velig cried out as burning shrapnel tore into his thigh plate and pierced the ceramite. The rest embedded itself in breacher shields, walls, buttressed alcoves and bulkheads, or shredded the deck.

The glare of the frag grenade faded and darkness reasserted itself. Low-intensity lumens created deep shadows, edging silhouettes in visceral red. Shrieking tocsins dulled the senses, something slightly aberrant in their tone.

To those infiltrating the ship, the sound could have been mistaken for

screaming.

Lumak bellowed, dragging Velig back into formation, his shield the capstone in an arch of adamantium bearing down on the fortifications protecting the ship's bridge. 'Advance!'

Having fought through the ship, several boarding parties had converged on this section, now led as one by the Avernii captain. Some fifty or so legionaries had gathered, most pressed into alcoves or sniping from behind protruding bulkheads. A force of well-dug-in defenders held them at bay.

Sons of Horus hunkered down behind auto-palisades that had sprung up from hidden recesses in the deck. Barely visible but for their glowing retinal lenses, sea-green armour plate turned dark crimson in the gloom, the renegades had no intention of giving up the bridge without a hard fight.

Protected by a foot-thick redoubt of ceramite and sitting at the apex of a long slope, they unleashed a sustained burst of mass-reactive fire in the wake of the grenade. Getting through the auto-palisades was proving difficult.

Bolt shells caromed off the Iron Tenth's shield wall. The salvoes caused no significant damage, but stymied attempts to close on the defenders.

A second shield line followed the first, eight abreast. Their bearers had bolt pistols too and shot through the gaps in the vanguard.

A hot brass round whipped by Lumak's head, but he didn't flinch. He fired his sidearm, leaving dents in the renegades' high-walled fortifications but achieving little else. A gantry ran around the inner wall of the auto-palisades and from here the Sons of Horus made their stand. Lumak reckoned on thirty or so Legiones Astartes holding the cordon. Defended as they were, it might as well have been a hundred.

Vox-chatter, barely audible over the unnerving klaxon scream, filtered through to his war-helm. At least eight additional boarding parties had gained the ship and were steadily fighting their way through it. Snatches of voices he couldn't place suggested there might be more.

Major sections of the vessel had already been secured or were close to being secured – enginarium, main gunnery decks, armoury, astropathic sanctum, apothecarion all now belonged to the Tenth and their allies. Some of the mortal defenders had put up a fight, loyal to their masters. Those who surrendered had been confined to the brig. None of the renegade legionaries had given quarter, and they were afforded none in return. Many now were either dead or restricted to parts of the ship where they could do no harm. Even so, defenders still outnumbered attackers. In order to take the ship, the Tenth needed the bridge.

That meant they had to breach these fortifications and the massive door that lay beyond them.

Other scattered reports spoke of more unsettling encounters, of mass suicides or strange rituals intended to achieve Throne only knew what. Rumours abounded, even amongst those who had seen little of the wider war, that Horus and his men dabbled in the occult.

An *otherness* afflicted the ship, Lumak had to admit that – a symptom of its inhabitants rather than the vessel itself, he thought. Embracing pragmatism, he chose to fight what he could see rather than concern himself with what he couldn't.

Only his forces and the few parties he had gathered on the way to it had reached as far as the command section.

'Tenacious, these former Wolves,' said Nuros. He had leaned in as close to Lumak as he could get, but still needed to shout.

Lumak snarled as slaved auto-turrets sprang from hidden silos in the deck. Chattering stubber fire raked the corridor, maintaining a relentless fusillade so the legionaries could reload. He swore. 'Gorgon's blood! Most of their legionaries are here, protecting the bridge. Tenacity has nothing to do with it.'

The Iron Hands advanced another step. Heavy cannon slugs and bolt shells pranged hard against the shields, sparks arrowing kinetically from every impact.

'Traitorous scum,' Lumak muttered, shoulder rammed tight into the back of his shield as the firestorm intensified.

'Bastards all,' Nuros agreed. 'I have a healthy desire to make them die painfully. Bring us closer, iron brother, so we might acquaint ourselves with them.'

Nuros and the Drakes stayed low and behind the second rank, a warband of variously armed Iron Hands amongst them. They had no breacher shields but if the Salamanders could get in close with their flame weapons, the fight would be over. Two further ranks followed the Drakes, but only the farthest away carried shields, held to the rear, back-to-back with the Iron Hands behind them as they retreated blindly towards the bridge. A strong defensive position, it had proven useful in the close, smoke-choked confines of the ship's labyrinth. It lacked expedience, however.

Sixty metres still separated the Iron Hands' first shield wall from the defenders.

Lumak scowled, his temper rising in the hot cauldron of the corridor.

'I'll get us closer,' he vowed between gritted teeth. 'Kurnox!' he bellowed. 'Take my shield.'

The Iron Hand pushed through from the rear rank as Lumak fell back and another took his place.

‘Hold here,’ he said, as Kurnox met him.

Lumak holstered his bolt pistol.

‘Are you about to name your sword in some insane act of heroism, iron brother?’ asked Nuros, hunkered beside Lumak now he had retreated from the vanguard. ‘Shall it be called *Impetuous?*’

Lumak muttered an invective under his breath, not deigning to look at the Salamander as he held out his hand to Kurox.

‘Plasma gun.’

Kurox unstrapped the gun from where he’d mag-locked it to his armour’s generator, and gave it to his captain.

It was a Thunderbolt-pattern variant from Ryza forge world, its muzzle scorched black by plasma burn. Lumak checked the weapon’s powercell and nodded.

‘It’ll do.’

Nuros clapped a hand on his shoulder.

‘You might get off a shot, iron brother, but step beyond this shield wall and you’ll be cut down.’

‘Mourn me, will you, Drake?’

‘Who else will I mock?’ he said airily, though his retinal lenses burned with fierce intensity.

Lumak shrugged off Nuros’ hand.

‘I don’t plan on dying here,’ he said and set the plasma gun to charge. It whined as it reached optimal and then went beyond, threatening a catastrophic overheat. ‘Not with my sword unremembered.’ Holding the weapon by its strap, he bellowed to the front rankers, ‘Shields up!’, and those in the second line hoisted their shields onto the first, setting them at an oblique angle, tip to base, reaching over their comrades, who had crouched to help affect the formation.

The whine turned to a shriek, signalling an imminent reaction. Lumak hurled the gun like a tossed grenade. It arced, high to low, less than aerodynamic but driven by the strength of the throw, its parabola quickly lost behind the wall of stacked shields.

Lumak could imagine the confusion of his enemies. The old Luna Wolves had been disciplined, and the Sons of Horus who they became afterwards had not diminished in that martial aspect, but it only took the slightest hesitation for the flung plasma gun to reach its mark.

One of the renegades shouted out a warning.

Too late.

The powercell detonated, a reaction so volatile it could easily kill a legionary in full war-plate. It killed several. It also tore an ugly breach in the auto-palisade.

Lumak bellowed the charge, incoherent, wrathful.

Reverting back to two ranks, the Iron Hands bulled down the corridor, impervious to the renegades' suppressing fire. They reached as far as the breach, one of the auto-turrets also destroyed by the blast, then parted to admit the Drakes.

Fire surged through the ragged gap, hungry, eager. It turned molten one of the Sons of Horus who had tried to staunch it. He fought on for a few more seconds as his armour burned and smoke drooled from the eye-slits in his helm, before crumpling to his knees, little more than a brown smudge slowly dying in the flames.

A spear thrust came through the inferno, impaling another renegade, Umendi at the other end of it. He hauled the warrior off his feet, roaring to brace himself against the immense weight of a legionary in power armour.

Nuros hefted a power axe, gave a curt shout and flung it into the dangling renegade's chest to cease his struggles.

Fire came in Nuros' wake, the Pyroclasts amongst his followers unleashing the fury of their namesake and turning the corridor into a roaring conflagration.

Any ordinary warriors would have baulked when faced with the terrible flames, but Space Marines ceased to be ordinary during the apotheosis brought about by the Emperor's uncanny science, and the Sons of Horus had ever been the finest of the Legions.

The renegades fought even as they burned. A Salamander fell, spitting blood from his mouth-grille, a combat knife lodged firmly in his throat. An Iron Hand spun, shield arm severed from his body and left to clang noisily to the deck in his wake as a host of bolter shells riddled his torso. Lumak's warriors emerged far from unscathed, the deaths spiteful and galling, but the Sons of Horus had the worst of it.

Lumak drew his Medusan zweihander, appreciating the heft of the weapon before he engaged its disruptor field and severed a renegade's neck. The struck head had barely hit the ground as he impaled another. On he went, cutting down those who had betrayed his brethren and killed them without honour. Whether the renegades before his sword had been at Isstvan did not matter; the act of righteous and murderous vengeance was justification enough.

It ended swiftly enough, bloody bodies, gently drifting smoke and the crackle of slowly dwindling fires a lasting memento of the deed.

'To the door,' breathed Lumak, still drunk on anger as he finished a dying legionary with a curt, downward thrust of his sword. He noticed the others did the same, choosing head and hearts for the killing blow.

Just a little farther now. The door, then the bridge, and victory. It would be bloody.

Nuros held one warrior down by his chest, pushing a serrated knife into his unprotected cranium as he knelt over him. He looked up through a snarling draconic mask of aspirated blood.

'Iron brother…' said Nuros, reaching for his culverin.

Lumak had turned to urge the rest of his charges on. Only when he looked back to the door to the bridge did he understand the Salamander's warning.

The massive door to the bridge had begun to open.

Pressure seals exhaled in a violent spray of pneumatic gases, filling the corridor with a thick white cloud. Behind it, the door continued to slide apart. It did so by degrees, layers of protective adamantium slowly peeling back in several different directions. The first panel split vertically down the middle, a second behind it diagonally, a third horizontally, until only the impeded archway of the door remained and the hulking figure framed by it.

A Dreadnought, Contemptor-pattern, stepped through the fog, the eye-slits in its battered silver helm aflame. Sea-green armour shone dully in the light of ebbing fires, a red omnipotent eye emblazoned on its left shoulder guard and breastplate. Chains clanked shrilly against slab-sided greaves as it walked, skulls hooked to their ends.

'Abomination,' hissed Nuros.

It lunged, pistons in its arms grinding, and smashed an Iron Hand down into the deck with its power fist. The backswing killed another, embedding a warrior into the wall.

Corposant drooled off its mechanical fingers, blood fizzing off the energy field as it burned.

Vox-horns attached to its sarcophagus bellowed, the sound almost bestial. The atonal blaring set Lumak's teeth on edge and he grimaced.

The monstrous war machine advanced, its stride fast and thunderous.

An autocannon chugged into action and Lumak shouted.

'Ware!'

Breacher shields were raised, but many of the Tenth had lowered them first to

revel in their vengeance. A savage spit of flame chased across the deck, stitching high-velocity rounds up the chest of one Iron Hand, who fell, shield in hand, sawn almost in half. A second warrior in black fell, his legs mowed out from under him. Agonised flailing followed, leg stumps spitting blood.

A stray round caught the promethium flask of one of the Pyroclasts. The explosion immolated the Salamander and two of his brothers, their bodies tossed into the air like wind-thrashed leaves.

The Iron Hands and their ever-diminishing allies fell back, retreating as far as the broken auto-palisades. Breacher shields took the worst of the autocannon fire but the Dreadnought's main threat lay in its bulk and the strength of its power fist. It tore a section of auto-palisade from the deck and used it to cut an Iron Hand in half across the midriff.

'Kill it!' bellowed Lumak, and the roar of bolters struck up.

The heavy rounds rebounded off the Dreadnought's formidable armour, barely denting it.

Lumak waded in with his sword, ducking a swipe of the crackling power fist that scored a heat burn across his brow and claimed the head of Velig, who had followed behind his captain. Lumak cut a deep groove with the zweihander but failed to penetrate the Dreadnought's armoured hide. It battered him aside with its sheer bulk and he cried out in defiance.

Nuros leapt to his brother's defence, power axe crashing against a leg piston and severing it. The Dreadnought staggered, venting oil and gas from the wound, abruptly crippled but still dangerous. A wild swipe of its power fist caught Nuros a glancing blow that sent him sprawling across the deck, and his power axe clattering away into darkness.

Two Iron Hands rushed the Contemptor, breacher shields locked together like a battering ram. The clash of metal against metal resounded, resonant at close quarters, and the Dreadnought rocked back a fraction. Lumak lunged, bleeding from his side but ignoring the pain, and drove his sword lance-like into an eye-slit, where it lodged fast.

Sustained bolter salvoes did the rest, pummelling the Dreadnought until its upper-to-lower mass ratio reached a tipping point and it fell hard, a mythic giant struck down by a sling stone.

Nuros and the Drakes fell upon it with flamers and artisan blades, concentrating on joints and cables, exploiting any crack in the Dreadnought's protective aegis. It thrashed, burning within the amniotic residue of its sarcophagus, a plaintive yet rancorous wail emitting from its vox-horns as it died.

Lumak wrenched his blade free as other Iron Hands and Salamanders hacked the monster apart in its death throes, venting relief and anger. Viscous matter sprayed up from the sarcophagus as it cracked apart against a hail of blows, the shrivelled creature within reduced to ruin. In the aftermath, the warriors from two sundered Legions gazed up from their sudden frenzy and saw the door to the bridge agape…

…as a second Dreadnought stomped across the threshold to take the place of the first. More heavily armoured than its predecessor, it clashed together twin power fists, releasing a cascade of sparks and crackling energy from the competing disruptor fields.

Its vox-emitters bellowed a challenge.

'**Lupercal!**'

Lumak sagged in his armour. Scattered, badly beaten, with several of their brothers dead, the Iron Tenth and their allies would not win this fight.

He raised his sword anyway.

The Dreadnought advanced, slowly at first but accelerating into an unstoppable charge.

Lumak had been too bullish. His confidence or his shame had brought about this end. He resolved to meet it as his brothers of the Avernii had met theirs. Bloodily.

He roared. 'Gor-gon! Gor-gon!'

And kept on screaming as his iron brothers took up the chant. He charged, zweihander aimed at his enemy, a knight without his horse, a madman ready to sell his life for a glorious death.

'**Lupercal!**' The vox-emitters blared so loudly and violently it distorted the feed.

'Gor-gon!' answered the Tenth, as the scattered but grimly determined Drakes took up the name of their primarch.

Lumak raised his sword aloft, a final salute.

Nuros was by his side, and shouted his last oath.

'I name it *Traitorbane*. I name it *Fury* and *Vengeance* and *Vindicator*, for the glory of Vulkan, for the Gorgon!'

The Dreadnought's eyes burned with the promise of retribution for its fallen comrade. Drakes and Iron Hands ran on with abandon, howling the names of their primarchs and singing death songs.

Only a few metres separated them all.

A low detonation shook the corridor. Warriors stumbled. It presaged a ceiling

collapse. Adamantium plating and other less identifiable debris spilled from the deck above. Something had bored through. It thrust the two battling sides apart. The smell of burnt metal filled the corridor, carried on an outpouring of sealant dust. A figure descending through that grimy cloud struck a swift blow that arrested the Dreadnought's forward momentum and caved in its helmet.

Barely visible in the shadows and the still falling wreckage, the figure stood before the war machine, dwarfed by it and yet somehow also greater in stature.

Vox-horns declared the Dreadnought's anger and pain.

It staggered, mortally wounded, arms flailing until a second blow swept off its leg, splitting it all the way along the piston joint. Swinging two-handed, the glint of half-light briefly limning a hammer's head, the figure split apart the sarcophagus.

Silence followed, disturbed only by the crackle of shorting wires and the slow *plink* of cooling metal. The Dreadnought's struggles ceased.

A last rearguard of Sons of Horus emerged from the bridge, rushing into the carnage, prepared to sell their lives dearly. Three figures, smaller than the first, dropped from the gaping hole in the ceiling and despatched the charging legionaries swiftly and dispassionately.

After it was done, they lowered their weapons and stood at the threshold of the bridge, awaiting their leader.

One held aloft his gauntleted hand. He balled his fist and it ignited, a fiery torch to light the way.

A giant stood within its glow in scalloped armour of a draconic aspect, the snarling faces wrought into the greaves flickering in the red aura cast by the flames. A heavy cloak of scale hung from his shoulders, and he gripped his hammer in one armoured hand.

Nuros and the surviving Drakes fell to their knees.

Vulkan strode to the threshold of the bridge and then stepped aside.

'The honour is yours,' he said in a chasmal voice.

Lumak regarded him, belatedly lowering his sword and then sheathing it across his back. He reached out a hand to Nuros, hauling the Salamander to his feet.

'Up, Drake,' he hissed. 'We have a ship to claim for Meduson.'

Nuros arose, unsteady at first and humbled when he saw Vulkan and his retinue bow their heads before the true conquerors of the *Horus Triumphant*.

'I am not worthy of this,' Nuros breathed, as he and Lumak led the others to their victory, and nodded in fierce pride to his lord as he passed.

'They are all dead,' said Lumak with quiet solemnity.

The entire bridge crew had been slain. Even the servitors had not been spared. They knelt in a long row before the oculus, slumped forwards or off to one side, a dark wound in each of their backs where a blade had been thrust through the spine and into the heart. A bloody stain spread beneath them, still wet.

'Such fanatical devotion,' said Nuros as he stepped onto the raised command dais. The others spread out around the bridge, weapons raised, but nothing lived to threaten them here anymore.

'Can any of us here claim any different?' Lumak replied, though the sight of so many killed in this way turned his blood.

'Not this, iron brother,' Nuros said softly, noting the sigil a helmsman had tried to daub in his own blood before he had died. It resembled the eye of Horus. 'Never like this.'

Vulkan entered the bridge last of all, behind his retinue. Removing his dragon helm, he looked darkly at the scene before him.

'Our former brothers-in-arms have fallen far…'

He stooped by a female in an officer's garb, a flag lieutenant judging by her trappings. She had rolled onto her back in death and stared upwards into the rafters of the bridge as if looking into an unseen abyss, her eyes possessed of some final madness.

Vulkan gently closed them, and rose slowly to his feet.

'This ship should be razed to scrap.'

'It is my Warleader's will that it be taken, lord primarch,' said Lumak with all due deference.

'Meduson will do what he will,' Vulkan replied, his retinue looking on sternly at the Iron Tenth as they came to his side. 'But it does not mean he is right. Raze the ship – no good can come of its continued existence.'

Lumak had been about to reply when Vulkan slammed the pommel of his hammer into the ground. The resonant clang preceded the sudden rush of matter displacement as the primarch and his warriors vanished in a storm of crackling light and eldritch thunder. A circle of smoke and a few diminishing motes of psychic corposant lingered in their wake. Nuros touched his fingers to the scorched ring of the teleportation burn and closed his eyes.

Lumak knew a farewell when he saw it.

'He has gone…' said the Salamander, head bowed, scarcely louder than a whisper.

'He may yet return, Nuros,' said Lumak, resting a hand upon his friend's shoulder.

Nuros looked up from his momentary reverie and smiled, though his eyes betrayed the pain of rejection he felt.

‘I think not, Lumak.’

TWENTY-TWO

Vulkan leaves, the alliance ended

Vulkan stepped off the dais, tendrils of ghostly warp matter still clinging to his armour.

Warding sigils had been carved into the dark metal clanging under his feet and those of the Draaksward. A shiver of unease passed through him as he crossed the threshold of the dais, descending the steps into the *Iron Heart*'s teleportarium pit, and he gripped the talisman hung around his neck.

'Father…' said Zytos, and quickly came to the primarch's side.

'It's nothing, Barek,' Vulkan replied. 'An echo, no more than that.'

He had felt *something* though, a presence and the malevolent regard of an unclean thing.

'Do you smell that?' he asked, looking up at the servitors and enginseers toiling heedlessly in the dimly lit shadows.

Zytos shook his head. 'I smell ozone, the scent of hot metal…'

Both were common during matter translation.

Vulkan's eyes narrowed as if searching the chamber for something just beyond his sight.

'Not that,' he said. 'I smell… decay. Corruption.'

Zytos shared a concerned glance with Gargo and Abidemi, who joined them at the foot of the steps.

'We should be away from here,' Vulkan told them, his voice thick.

'*Vulcanis* awaits us in the launch bay and should be ready to depart,' said Gargo.

Vulkan nodded. He looked to Abidemi.

'Atok, go on ahead and ensure there are no delays.'

Abidemi gave a curt nod himself and hurried to do his primarch's bidding.

As the others left the teleportarium in his wake, the foulness Vulkan had detected began to fade as did the atonal droning from the arcane mechanism of the dais.

A servitor barred the entry door to the launch bay. Abidemi stood in front of it, his back to Zytos, Gargo and Vulkan as they approached.

An empty scabbard hung from Abidemi's belt, and he held a dragon-toothed blade in his hand.

'Step aside,' he growled, advancing on the servitor. He raised *Draukoros*, about to cut the creature down.

'Hold, brother,' called Zytos, moving ahead of the others. 'What's all this?'

'It refuses us entry to the launch bay.'

Zytos turned his gaze on it. 'Speak, creature, why can we not pass?'

As Vulkan reached them, the servitor knelt and its jaws distended to reveal the iris of a hololithic projector embedded into its mouth.

'I think we are about to have our answer, Barek.'

Mechanisms implanted in the servitor's body clicked and whirred with sudden activation. An image stuttered to life, spilling from its mouth in a grainy cone of grey light.

'*Vulkan…*'

Meduson stood before them, speaking from the bridge of the *Iron Heart*. In the background, just hinted at by the expanse of the oculus, the battle had begun anew.

'*I am sorry I cannot bid you farewell in person*,' he said, '*but the Sons of Horus are regathering their forces and we must strike at them before they are ready to re-engage. The way is open and you have my leave to depart. It has been an honour, lord primarch.*'

'His *leave?*' muttered Zytos, low enough so that only his comrades could hear him. He bit back his anger behind a barricade of teeth.

Vulkan did not react to the mild impertinence, but instead was gracious.

'The honour is mine, Warleader Meduson. You have saved us more than once, and have my profound gratitude for your service.'

'*Perhaps I will meet you again at Terra*,' Meduson replied, cutting off the feed.

The projection went dark, the servitor rising and standing aside having completed its allotted task.

'Perhaps…' said Vulkan to the shadows.

The door to the launch bay parted.

'He kept us here for that?' asked Zytos.

Distant thunder tolled across the deck as the *Iron Heart*'s guns spoke.

'Battle comes,' said Vulkan. 'Let us be away from here.'

'It sits ill to flee from a fight,' said Abidemi, faultlessly honest.

Vulkan put a hand on his shoulder, looking him in the eye.

'None here feel any different, my son, but our path does not end on the *Iron Heart* and we must follow it again.'

'To where then, father?' asked Gargo.

Vulkan turned so he could regard them all.

'To Caldera, to the eldritch gate Ferrus and I left behind.'

A flight-ready gunship awaited the Salamanders in the launch bay, Meduson true to his word. *Vulcanis* purred in its docking cradle, eager to be loose.

Vulkan and his warriors boarded without incident. Gargo took the pilot's throne and the others sat silently in the troop hold.

The *Iron Heart*'s guns still sounded as the launch bay doors opened, venting the air even as they admitted the cold of the void. The thunderous retorts were distant, merely ranging shots, a second engagement not far off.

The ready lumen flared red to green and they were away, spearing into the darkness with engines at full burn. None challenged them; the battleships and their escorts had fiercer enemies to concern them. No one cared about a lone gunship angling for the breach in the line.

'They have passed through the blockade,' said Aug, his attention on the hololith display and the departing icon representing the *Vulcanis*. Matched against the great warships it barely registered, but Aug saw it. He saw much.

'And so ends our alliance with the primarch,' replied Meduson.

'You sound bitter, Warleader,' noted Aug.

'I am sanguine enough, Iron Father.' Meduson never moved from the oculus. 'Besides, I have no time for bitterness. I have a war to fight. And win.'

'We could hold them here,' suggested Mechosa. 'Keep them at arm's length and slowly break them apart with our guns.'

Meduson shook his head.

'That will take too long. The renegades have enough strength remaining to make this awkward if we allow it.' He paused to consider his plan. His eyes drank in every detail afforded by the oculus. The Iron Hands had effectively enveloped the surviving Sons of Horus ships. They even had the *Horus*

Triumphant amalgamated with their fleet. Overall fighting strength had been tipped in their favour. Distance remained a factor, however, with the Iron Hands dispersed over a huge tranche of the void, whereas the renegades had regrouped into a much tighter formation.

A large number of enemy ships still opposed the Iron Tenth and showed no signs of capitulation.

'We attack in two wings, and make the most of our positioning. As soon as the first wing has engaged, the second moves in. The Sons of Horus will face an attack on two sides. Our refused flank will then–'

A shriek of vox distortion interrupted him.

Several members of the mortal crew grimaced as Meduson and Mechosa regarded the vox-hailer that served the bridge.

Aug looked to the master of vox, a grizzled man with a balding pate, dark stubble around his chin and cheeks, his left ear a bionic.

'Malfunction, Baelor?' Aug asked.

'No, lord, the signal is external to the *Iron Heart*. It is coming from the renegade fleet.'

'Perhaps they wish to surrender?' suggested Mechosa dryly.

Meduson did not answer. He barely heard him. 'What is this now?' he whispered to himself instead as a familiar voice crackled across the feed.

'*Meduson… This is a message for the beggar-lord known as Shadrak Meduson*.'

'This again,' snapped Mechosa. 'He goads us, Warleader.'

'He goads *me*.'

The recording continued as it had before, declaring Marr's intent, mocking Meduson's prowess, signing his death warrant.

'Silence it!' demanded Aug, the master of vox already trying and failing to root out the infiltration and end it.

Aug stepped from his post to advance on Baelor and the vox-station.

'Do it, or I shall.'

And then something happened that had not happened before, and everyone stopped what they were doing to listen.

'*You have made a fight of it*,' said Marr, breaking from the script. '*I salute you for that, Meduson. It is you, isn't it? I hope so. I thought our paths had crossed before but you proved elusive. This time, I think it is you. Yes, no need to answer. You are here. So am I. Shall we finish this then? Or are you just a beggar-lord after all?*'

The message ended, and the vox returned to normal.

'How?' demanded Meduson.

The master of vox shook his head, unable to explain.

'Aug?' snapped Meduson.

The Iron Father had shuffled Baelor aside to conduct his own investigation into how the *Iron Heart*'s communications had been so routinely hijacked.

'I have no answer at this time.'

'Is it him?'

Again, Aug interrogated the signal, then performed a swift analysis.

'I am reading a ship's ident that was not present before,' he said.

Meduson said nothing. He glared.

Aug turned to face him, looking up from the vox-station.

'It is the *Lupercal Pursuivant*.'

'A false signal, it must be,' said Mechosa, but without confidence. 'If they can breach our vox, what else are they capable of?'

'It's definitely the ship,' Aug replied. 'I am in no doubt. It cannot be a coincidence.'

Meduson had turned back to the oculus, as if by sight alone he could cut to the truth of it.

'To goad us just as Vulkan leaves? How could he have known, Aug? Why wouldn't he have stopped him?'

'Because he doesn't want Vulkan. He wants you, my brother.'

'It *is* him,' said Meduson, nodding.

'He wants you to engage, Warleader,' said Aug. 'We should obliterate the fleet from distance. Wound them and then withdraw.'

'And let him escape again.' Meduson shook his head. 'I can't allow that, Aug. He's here, *now*. I must end him, end this. For good. We cannot be the Iron Tenth until he is dead.'

'We *are* the Tenth, Meduson. You forged us thusly,' said Aug. 'It's not logical to engage at close quarters.'

'I am sorry, old friend, but if there's even a chance he will slip by us… It's not about logic any more. This is something more primal that that.'

'You want to kill him yourself,' said Aug, and the mild rebuke in his tone saw Meduson turn and give him a warning glance.

'I *will* kill him, Aug. I will do it to save this Legion. You said yourself, the Legion must survive. It will not unless Tybalt Marr is a festering corpse, his neck severed at the edge of my blade.'

‘Then cripple his ship first, destroy his outriders and sunder his fleet,’ said Aug. ‘And when he has nowhere to turn, then we kill him. Then *you* kill him.’

Meduson waited silently for a few seconds then nodded.

‘You’re right, Aug. My humours are getting the better of me.’ He addressed Mechosa. ‘All ships to engage from distance. Let’s crack them open on our long guns, and fight a war of attrition. It’s what we Iron Tenth excel at.’

Mechosa relayed the orders, as Meduson and Aug shared a glance before the Warleader returned to the oculus.

He could not deny the logic, but he would not allow Marr to escape. This ended now.

Him dead or me, thought Meduson.

TWENTY-THREE

Sword names, given in memoriam

Aboard the *Horus Triumphant*, the orders came through from the *Iron Heart*.

In the short time it had taken to assume control of the ship, Lumak and Nuros had set about ensuring they had its guns, its engines and its shields. The warp drive was also guarded and any remaining rogue elements loyal to the Sons of Horus were systematically being rooted out and captured or killed. The process was not unlike hunting down rats, for although the Iron Tenth and their allies controlled the ship, they did so by dint of possessing its vital areas, rather than through numerical superiority. That, for now, remained with the renegades.

Nuros had no taste for void war, so Lumak took the throne and overall command. Without a bridge crew, he put fresh servitors to work and had his warriors oversee everything they did.

'We might not be agile, but we are battle ready,' said Lumak as an armature descended to remove his power generator and cables snaked into ports on his armour, jacking him in to the ship's many systems.

Nuros faced the oculus, his arms folded.

'Shall we get underway, iron brother?' he asked.

Lumak looked to the ship's helm.

'All ahead full. Bring us to within lance range and then commence persistent bombardment.'

With a lurch of engines the *Horus Triumphant* began to move, coming abeam of the *Enduring Tenth* and *Morlock.*

Lances began to prime, building to optimal power.

Engagement with the remaining Sons of Horus fleet showed across the oculus. Silent prow guns and broadsides flashed in the darkness. Shield flare rippled

across the *Horus Triumphant'*s front aspect.

'Battle stations,' intoned Lumak, and the lights on the bridge dimmed. They flickered once, and Nuros looked up at the sudden staccato flash but the lights normalised quickly enough.

'Prepare to fire,' Lumak said calmly, the captured ship still driving forwards. 'Reduce speed to one-third.'

The engine thrum eased. Tremors underfoot lessened, even as the hull groaned with the diminished pressure on its physical integrity.

The shields flared constantly now, as an unending barrage came from the Sons of Horus ships fearlessly closing on the Iron Tenth.

'They are trying to provoke us, Drake,' said Lumak, feeling powerful with the fury of a battleship at his fingertips.

Nuros did not answer. The lights flickered again, in time with the shield flare.

The *Horus Triumphant,* together with the *Enduring Tenth* and the *Morlock,* moved in a wedge, a discrete flotilla within the broader Iron Hands fleet.

Hundreds of glittering contrails lit the void, the wake of a mass torpedo launch.

The engines trembled again, fed by a sudden surge of power.

Lumak looked to the ship's helm.

'Why aren't we slowing down?'

The Iron Hand at the helm shook his head. He wrenched the servitor aside, effectively destroying it as he tried to access the engines himself.

Lumak engaged the vox to the enginarium, hailing the warriors he had placed to safeguard it but a weird static fouled any attempts to reach them.

He then noticed the lances had yet to fire.

He leaned up from his command throne, straining at the cables trying to hold him down.

'Nuros…'

The Salamander had drawn his axe, his gaze on the part of the bridge where the dead crew had lain, executed in ritual fashion.

The bodies had been removed but the stain of their deaths remained. Vapours rose from the blood. Lumak saw faces within them. They were thickening by the second, coalescing into a murky red pall.

'Gorgon's mercy…' he breathed, severing the cables with his gladius and wincing at the empathic pain of separation. For a fleeting moment he felt the presence of the ship, wrathful and utterly alien. 'All hands–' he began to say before something materialised in the vapours.

A flash of light threw Nuros back. He struck the oculus.

A stink of sour milk and spoiled meat fouled the air. It was hot and heady with the energy release of sudden matter translation.

Three hulking black-armoured forms emerged through the blood mist, clad in Cataphractii war-plate. A red glow emanated from the vision slits in their helms, promising pain, exuding malice. They proclaimed their allegiance boldly, the eye of Horus emblazoned on their massive shoulder guards.

Gunfire flared from the figures, scything down servitors and legionaries with abandon.

Lumak cried out, 'Justaerin!' at the same moment as the vox shrieked back to life. Frantic reports flooded the feed, vying with the screams of battle and the cries of the dying. Fear and fury erupted in sudden cacophony. Across the entire ship, the Iron Hands and their allies came under attack via matter translation. And in turn the newly arrived warriors released others, and all too soon the interlopers were overrun.

At every ritual site, at every fane and shrine the Tenth had shattered under stock and heel, the warriors of the XVI Legion appeared.

Lumak staggered from the throne, his skull hammering with the pain of forced dislocation. A melta beam speared Kurnox through the chest, halting his brave charge. He fell, left leg severed and most of his torso missing. He died quickly.

Nuros fought against one of the Justaerin, managing to hold his own against Ezekyle Abbadon's elite.

Lumak felt a bolt-round graze his skull as he reached for the zweihander. He leapt from the command dais, landing hard but rising fast as a power fist thundered into the deck where he had been crouched a moment before.

He slashed, shoulder to hip, parting reinforced adamantium plate with a single devastating blow. The Justaerin recoiled, barely able to comprehend what had just happened. Then his two halves slid apart, the weight of the upper dragging it across the lower, and he collapsed amidst his own steaming organs.

Two remained, one still carrying the multi-melta.

Nuros hacked pieces off the other one but as the *Horus Triumphant'*s broadsides sounded and sent a tremor through the ship, he lost his footing. The Justaerin's power fist caught him full in the chest, lifting Nuros off his feet and sending him flying back across the bridge.

The Justaerin turned, slowed considerably by his injuries, and Lumak ran the warrior through with his zweihander. As he wrenched the sword free, the last Justaerin on the bridge saw him. A melta beam caught the Iron Hand's shoulder, tearing off his pauldron and burning away everything beneath down to the bone.

Shutting down the agony, ignoring his left arm as it slumped uselessly by his side, Lumak hefted his sword in one hand and cast it like a spear.

The blade punched through the back of the Justaerin's helmet. The warrior staggered and then collapsed.

Another broadside rocked the bridge, now cast in the ugly, bruised glow of imminent shield failure. The traitors had retaken the ship's guns. Lumak would not yield the bridge.

He put his foot on the dead warrior's chest and wrenched free the sword with a scrape of metal and bone. Blood spat from the ragged wound.

The vox had not ceased shrieking. Weary, dying, Lumak shut it off. He would never reach the *Iron Heart*, and by now they would have realised the *Horus Triumphant* had been compromised.

As he staggered over to where Nuros lay unmoving, he noticed the cold carcass of the *Morlock* drifting across the oculus. Fires burned in its hollows, soon extinguished. A part of its superstructure had broken off and hung forlornly in the void. The broadsides at close range from the *Horus Triumphant* had gutted it. He tried not to think about the surprise and horror the poor souls within must have experienced when a ship they believed a friend, but wearing the enemy's face, had turned on them.

The shields flared again, and he shaded his eyes against the harsh glare. Not long now until total collapse. He sagged down by Nuros' side. Everyone else was dead. The ship was dead. It had betrayed them, just as their brothers had betrayed them. He should not be surprised, he supposed. Nuros lay on his front. With some effort, Lumak rolled him over.

The Salamander's eyelids flickered then opened. His chest was ruined, the breastplate dented inwards and leaking blood. Lumak did not need an Apothecary's training to know Nuros had suffered catastrophic organ damage.

'You should be dead,' he whispered, hot tears stinging the cuts on his pale face, as he knelt by the Salamander's side.

Nuros smiled, his teeth bloody. He coughed up a gout of blood, phlegm and other organic matter.

'Tell me…' he rasped with profound difficulty, spitting up dark red flecks with every breath. 'Have you named… your sword?'

'I name it *Firedrake*,' Lumak said, with more conviction and vehemence than he had felt in a long time. 'In honour of the fallen, and for a bond of brotherhood that runs deeper than blood or Legion.'

Nuros smiled, then was dead.

Lumak bowed, the hilt of the zweihander pressed to his forehead.

The shields failed in a spectacular explosion of light.

Lumak raised his eyes, determined to meet his end with defiance in his heart.

'Gorgon! Vulkan!' he bellowed, a shoal of torpedoes moments from impact, and embraced the fire.

The defection and subsequent death of the *Horus Triumphant* destroyed both the *Morlock* and the *Enduring Tenth*. In turn, their death throes crippled the *Sturmdrang* and the *Strength of Iron.*

Meduson's advantage, like his composure, dwindled to smoke.

Sensing weakness, Marr's fleet pressed their attack but the battle's outcome still rested on a knife's edge.

'*This is reckless.*'

Aug's words crackled through Meduson's helm vox as he made haste to the launch bays.

'It's vengeance,' he snarled. 'For Lumak and Nuros, and every one of our sworn brothers who died on that ship. Marr dies. I won't run from him anymore.'

He passed through the spinal corridor, a train of Iron Hands in tow.

'*To stand and fight now sees us in a losing position.*'

'Does logic tell you that, Aug?'

'*Must I answer that?*'

The doors parted with a soft hiss. Light and sound briefly flooded the corridor before the doors sealed shut again behind Meduson and his warriors.

'Asked and answered, I'd say. I defy your logic – it has brought us nothing but pain.'

'*It is the Iron Creed,*' said Aug. '*It is the reason we still survive and shall go on to survive after this. I implore you, Shadrak, turn back. Retreat and salve our wounds. Honour Lumak and the others.*'

Mechosa went on ahead, hailing the enginseers and ensuring every boarding torpedo was ready for imminent launch.

'There is no honour in retreat, Jebez. Bring the *Iron Heart* within minimum range of our boarding craft. As soon as our forces have breached the *Lupercal Pursuivant*, engage the rest of Marr's fleet hard. Borgus and Jakkus are poised to commit every asset they have to this. Make sure their launches are simultaneous with ours. I will need the aid of their warriors once aboard. After I cut the head from this snake, the renegades' stomach for a fight will diminish.'

'*You will not be dissuaded?*'

‘I will not.’

‘*Then what choice have I but to do as ordered?*’

‘None.’

Meduson cut the feed.

Last aboard the insertion craft, he never gave the *Iron Heart* a second glance as he climbed into a grav-harness. His only thought was of reaching the *Lupercal Pursuivant* and a reckoning with Tybalt Marr.

The engines fired, hot and roaring.

Aug listened to the dead feed for a moments, before returning to his duties.

He brought the *Iron Heart* close, weathering a severe amount of punishment.

The launch sigil on the ship’s helm display turned from red to green as they reached minimum range.

‘All vessels away,’ he intoned and the *Iron Heart* sent forth her payload into the darkness.

Numerous boarding craft struck out for the *Lupercal Pursuivant*, several of them decoys bearing false heat signatures to fool the enemy’s missiles.

Aug watched them keenly via the tactical hololith.

Three failed to reach the target, shot down or driven off course. The rest reached the ship. A further two exploded to the diligent fire of automated deck guns before they could breach. The rest cut through the hull and made swift ingress.

Meduson was amongst them.

‘Thank the Gorgon,’ he muttered. No one heard him, his words lost amidst the clamour of battle. Nor did they hear him hail Kuleg Rawt and the other Iron Fathers.

A heavy firefight had seized the arterial corridor to the armoury.

Meduson and Mechosa had made steady progress towards the bridge, their boarding torpedo hitting high above the vessel’s midline and only a few decks below command. A fierce battle had seen them overwhelm an under-strength barracks, but they ran foul of automated defences and barricades en route to the armoury.

A ferocious barrage of weapons fire had them pinned behind their boarding shields, an ever-diminishing ring of iron.

‘Aug,’ Meduson bellowed down the vox. ‘Send reinforcements. Every reserve we’ve got. Concentrate on this position. And where are Jakkus and Borgus’ squads, damn it?’

Aug gave no response.

Meduson tried again, but still got the same result. Static. Dead air.

He exchanged a grim look with Mechosa, their eyes just visible behind the glow of retinal lenses.

'We are on our own,' said Meduson.

'What of Jakkus and Borgus?'

'Have you heard from either of them or their promised boarding squads since we first breached the hull?'

Mechosa shook his head.

'Either they are dead,' said Meduson, 'or they aren't coming.'

'Then we have to break out ourselves.' Mechosa drew a power maul, a weapon of the Meridius pattern, and sent a crackle of energy across its flanged head. 'I'll lead the sortie. You follow, Warleader.'

'I'll lead, Mechosa.'

Mechosa shook his head. 'With respect, I cannot allow that. You have to reach Marr and kill him.'

Knowing better than to resist, Meduson nodded.

Mechosa led the charge. He took several hits, his armour split and broken. He had to limp the last few metres but the automatic guns fell silent, spiked by krak grenades.

Smoke and the acerbic stench of fyceline hung heavy in the recycled atmosphere. As it slowly dissipated, it revealed two dead Iron Hands.

Meduson murmured their names, committing their sacrifice to memory.

'Mechosa,' he said upon reaching the Clan Sorrgol captain. 'Can you walk?'

Mechosa had bled profusely but his body had already begun to seal its wounds. 'I'll need a bionic when this is over,' he said, gesturing to his ruined leg. 'I can walk. I'll bloody fight too.'

Meduson clapped him on the shoulder. 'By the Gorgon, you will.'

He paused to review the schematic extracted from one of the ship's cogitators. Daenalok had died to retrieve that information. He had been amongst the first to fall when they had breached the ship. Meduson swore then he would not waste his brother's sacrifice.

A labyrinthine nest of corridors lay ahead, followed by a large atrium Meduson did not like the look of. A much narrower sword hall ran underneath it, almost parallel. Cross it, fight their way up one deck and they would be standing before the bridge. Meduson marked the route on his retinal display and sent it to the rest of the boarding party.

The last few sections of the ship had been manned by automated defences.

'Marr is running out of men. He must have spent a lot of lives trying to kill us, but I'm still not risking that atrium. It's too wide. Too large.'

'The sword hall has alcoves, protruding buttresses. Solid cover,' said Mechosa.

It was decided.

They quickly reached the sword hall, despite Mechosa's injury.

A narrow chamber stretched before them, lit by burning lumen staves ensconced into the walls. Old banners hung in alcoves that described numerous campaigns and wars of conquest.

Meduson's bile rose when he saw a standard dedicated to the massacre at Isstvan V. He slashed it corner to corner with his Albian steel sword and the pieces fell to the floor. He spat on it, and the acid in his saliva burned the fabric.

A tall arch, limned with a faint gloaming light, awaited them at the end of the hall.

'A little foreboding,' remarked Mechosa.

'This entire ship is foreboding,' replied Meduson. 'It feels… *wrong*.'

A few warriors from the other boarding party nodded.

'Another route?' asked Mechosa.

They had already tried several, internal bulkheads shutting them out before they had progressed far.

The vox crackled, a moment of intemperate static.

'*Meduson,*' came a voice, broken but with the telltale metallic harshness of the Tenth.

'Brother! Your interruption is most welcome.'

'*Hurry… Meduson…*'

The voice sounded urgent, as if the speaker had been injured.

'Where are you, brother?'

'*Hurry… We are… dying…*'

Mechosa made to advance, until Meduson stopped him.

'We should not delay, Warleader,' he said.

'Something is wrong.'

'*Hurry… We will not last much longer…*'

'I hear Iron Hands in trouble,' said Mechosa. 'It must be the squads Jakkus sent, or Borgus.'

'Tell me, Mechosa,' said Meduson, glancing to the darkness now in their wake and measuring it against the wan light ahead. 'Do you recognise his voice?'

The plea for aid repeated, similar to before but always with the imperative

towards urgency.

Mechosa listened. His demeanour hardened, and he grew circumspect.

'I do not.'

'*Hurry… Please… or we are already dead…*'

Meduson turned to the others.

'We go back, find another way.'

He had been about to consult the schematic map when the image corrupted. Even his eidetic memory seemed unable to recall the layout, as if something were impeding it.

'*Hurry… We stand alone by the Gorgon's side… Hurry… for he has fallen…*'

Mechosa's voice grew cold, and the air seemed to freeze with it.

'That's Isstvan… How?'

'*Hurry… Meduson… Don't let us die…*'

'That's not Isstvan,' said Meduson. 'I don't know what that is, but it's not Isstvan and it's not our brothers. We go back. Now.'

A bulkhead slammed down, cutting off the route back.

Mechosa turned to Meduson. 'We could cut through it.'

Meduson thought about it but then shook his head. 'It would take too long, and we have no way of knowing how thick it is.'

'Why does it feel like we are being herded?'

Meduson eyed the gloaming light ahead.

'Because we are.'

He gave the order to advance.

'Move! To the light, to the light. Swiftly now, brothers.'

The Iron Hands hurried towards the arch, urgent, aggressive…

…until a bulkhead slammed down across it, smothering the light. Another slammed down at the other end of the hall, even further in, preventing escape.

'Two bulkheads behind, one ahead,' said Mechosa.

Meduson nodded. 'Shields up!'

The Iron Hands came together, shields facing out. Auto-defence turrets sprang from concealed compartments above, hidden in the vaults and the shadows.

Flamers bathed the shield wall, their intensity eventually breaking it apart before heavy bolters took advantage of the breach. The single cohort of Iron Hands broke into several smaller groupings, shooting up at the defensive weapons but finding them protected by shields with firing slits.

'Smash the heavy guns. Release smoke to foul their aim,' snapped Meduson. 'Stand together. Take it. We can break out of this.'

As the false walls behind the alcoves turned, becoming archways themselves and admitting Marr's warriors into the fray, Meduson realised they couldn't break out. He had been lured here to his death. He had been betrayed by those he considered his allies. Again.

A warrior cried out, 'Iron Tenth!' but was quickly silenced.

Others took up the cry and a brief fight ensued, but Meduson's men were soon killed or suppressed.

As the last sounds of battle died away, Meduson found himself on his knees facing Mechosa with the last of his men. All had been bound by the wrist with heavy manacles. Each had a chainblade or power sword resting against the back of his neck. Several lay on the ground, unmoving. Blood scent pricked his nostrils at the rough removal of his war-helm. A dark pool reached across the floor of the sword hall to touch his knee plates. His ragged face, glowering with impotent rage reflected back at him. He looked older than he remembered. Beaten.

'You bast–' Mechosa began, before a heavy blow silenced him and he slumped in his chains.

The others in the Tenth glared, stoic, defiant.

'Where is your leader?' Meduson hissed, slammed back down heavily as he tried to rise from his knees.

'All in good time,' a grating voice replied.

Meduson managed to turn his head a little and saw the edge of a mortuary sword, its basket hilt fashioned from some poor warrior's death mask. The weapon could easily cut his neck in two in a single blow, but he suspected it wasn't for this warrior to claim that honour.

'Do you recognise him?' asked the hulking champion who had Meduson at his mercy, gesturing to the death mask. 'One of yours… formerly.'

Meduson stared ahead, refusing to be goaded further.

A phalanx of Sons of Horus stood before him. The bulkheads had since been raised, and the light cast from the archway at the end of the hall just edged the upper parts of their armour.

Footsteps resounded, slow and deliberate.

In the background, the sounds of ship-to-ship combat steadily diminished.

The phalanx parted and a warrior stepped into the light, a captain judging by his rank markings. He had the look of a pugilist, bald and pugnacious.

'Oh,' said Tybalt Marr, 'how I have waited for this.' The captain cut a brutal and battle-hardened figure in his scarred war-plate. His face and shaven head

were a cartograph of suffering and conflict. His cold eyes looked eager for more. He smiled, then struck Meduson hard across the left temple.

The sword hall faded, turning to black. Darkness reigned.

Gorgonson headed with all haste for the *Iron Heart*'s launch bays. Borgus and Jakkus had not responded to his personal hails, the feed jammed. He had armoured himself, and his bolter hung by his side on a leather strap. A chainsword sat in a sheath across his back. A bandoleer of grenades was slung over his right shoulder and he clutched his helm in his left hand as he walked.

He had arranged for Dakkus, Belgred, Mymidos and Kellor to meet him at the gunships. In turn, they would each bring four others. Few warriors remained on the *Iron Heart* but Gorgonson was determined to gather as many as he could. Other battle-captains had pledged warriors too. Those he could reach.

He had not sought the aid of the Iron Fathers nor the veteran sergeant who served under Gaeln Krenn. A schism had torn apart the Iron Tenth. He had seen it first take root at Lliax but had failed to properly acknowledge the uncomfortable truth.

He trooped down the corridor, possessed of such urgency that he almost failed to see the two Immortals barring his path.

'Stand aside,' he growled, pulling up sharply.

Both Immortals held bolters at ease across their chests. Neither carried a breacher shield. One proffered the orb of a hololithic projector and Gorgonson scowled as he realised what must be coming next.

Aug's image came to life before him.

'*What are you doing, Goran?*' he asked. '*You are this ship's Apothecary, and are therefore needed here.*'

'I am leading a rescue attempt, Hand Elect. Warleader Meduson has been taken.' The last contact from the Iron Hands aboard the *Lupercal Pursuivant* had suggested as much. 'Borgus and Jakkus are unreachable. I don't believe their warriors made it to the enemy flagship.'

'I cannot sanction that. The fleet is in full retreat.'

'What?'

'*We are leaving, Goran.*'

'You will condemn him to death.'

'*Then he will have died bravely.*'

'You cannot mean this, Aug.'

'*It is better this way. Shadrak would have brought us to the edge of extinction.*'

‘He forged us into a Legion, and gave us hope.’

‘*I am sorry, Goran.*’

‘You don’t get to call me that. I do not recognise your friendship or fraternity.’ He spat onto the deck, the globule slowly sizzling as it ate away the metal. ‘I should’ve ended it on Lliax. You changed.’

‘*I did. I became stronger. The flesh is weak.*’

‘So are you, *Frater*,’ snapped Gorgonson, mustering as much bile as he could into the words.

‘*I am truly sorry. But the Legion must survive.*’

Gorgonson never even got a hand to his bolter before the Immortals cut him down.

A host of incorporeal figures surrounded Aug on the bridge.

Borgus and Jakkus had taken exception to the sudden withdrawal. Both raged at the *Iron Heart’*s Frater. A freak malfunction in their launch bays had prevented their troops joining Meduson’s aboard the *Lupercal Pursuivant*, and they demanded answers. Aug gave them none, nor did the apparitions of the Iron Fathers also summoned to the impromptu council.

Aug merely watched as one by one the hololithic feeds of any belligerent battle-captains flickered out, their signals overridden by the Iron Fathers.

Borgus would not submit without a fight, and turned to face some unknown opponent before his image crackled and disappeared. But Jakkus might yet relent, Aug considered, when he realised his situation had become untenable. The other officers fell into line quickly, or were placed under guard. Aug would convince them of the necessity for extreme measures later. He would convince them it was done for the right reasons, for logical reasons. The Legion must survive.

If only Meduson had realised that and what it meant, instead of pursuing his vengeful and ultimately self-destructive vendetta against Tybalt Marr.

‘*It is done?*’ asked Rawt, speaking for the newly arrayed Iron Council.

Aug nodded.

‘We shall endure, Iron Fathers. It is the will of the Gorgon.’

Meduson came around in a dank cell in the bowels of the *Lupercal Pursuivant*. Mechosa glanced across at him from the other side of their confinement. He had a blade to his neck, angled down towards the heart, and two renegades held him fast.

He saw no sign of the other warriors who had survived the ambush in the sword

hall.

'Let him go,' Meduson demanded, the pain in his skull where Marr had struck him a dull ache. He had minders too, and felt the pressure of augmented strength against his shoulders. The champion again.

'No,' said a voice from the shadows and Tybalt Marr stepped forwards. He gestured to Mechosa and then to his warriors. 'Kill him.'

Meduson roared, but they slew Mechosa without hesitation. The gladius came out of his neck slick and heady with transhuman blood. Meduson strained against his keepers, the veins in his neck bulging with effort, but was held fast.

'A little oil in there, perhaps?' said Marr.

'Bastard! What have you done with the rest of my men? Answer me!'

Marr drew close, gesturing casually to Mechosa. 'They share his fate.'

'I'll kill you for this. I'll bloody well kill you.' He struggled again, and felt the sword tips draw blood.

Marr merely looked his prey in the eye.

Meduson snarled through gritted teeth. 'My warriors are coming. I will be avenged.'

'You will kill me or your warriors will kill me? Which is it?'

'Either way, you'll be dead.'

Marr nodded, then motioned to the guards.

'Get him on his feet.'

Meduson felt the pain of his injuries flare in anger as he was hauled up.

Marr took another step. Their noses almost touched.

'Taller than I expected,' he said. 'It is really you, isn't it? I wanted to be sure. I had to be sure. But it's you this time.'

'I'll kill you,' Meduson seethed.

'You've said that already. I expected better, if I'm honest. Something…' He frowned, trying to find the right word, but failed and settled for a lesser one. 'More.'

'You filth. Fight me. Prove who is the stronger. It's what you want.'

Marr stepped back.

'Ah, that's better. Trying to find a way out. Your strategy is flawed though. Because you're wrong… *Shadrak*. You turned this into something personal. An oath sworn to your men, or more likely yourself. A vendetta. I, Tybalt Marr, your nemesis. I never cared about you, Meduson. But I had to be sure – I say that twice so you know why I've kept you alive this long. It's not because you are a worthy foe and I wanted to fight you in some vainglorious arena of death. I had

to know that you weren't coming back to haunt me like you did before. I don't want to duel…' He frowned as if the very idea was distasteful. 'Or prove my worth. There's no honour in putting down a beaten dog. It's just mercy. I just need you dead.'

Meduson snarled, defiant to the end. 'I hope you choke on my blood, you scum-eating wretch. You will never break us. The Iron Tenth will endure. We will end–'

Marr drew his sword. It took one blow to cut off Meduson's head.

Tybalt Marr reached down to grasp the Iron Hand's severed head by the scalp.

'Like father, like son,' he muttered. 'Isn't that the phrase?'

'I would have fought him for you,' said the champion, reluctantly sheathing his sword.

'I would not have him sully your blade, Cyon.'

Cyon Azedine looked down at the headless corpse. 'He was a worthy enemy.'

'Aye, he was. Most worthy. There will be worthier yet. Have no concern about that.'

Scybale stepped into Marr's eyeline, wearing a disgruntled expression.

'You have something to add, Kysen?' Marr asked. The part of the neck cavity still connected to Meduson's severed head dripped quietly onto the floor.

'The Iron Hands and their allies have withdrawn from the field. If we neglect to pursue they might–'

'Do not worry yourself, Kysen. The Tenth are done. Without him, they pose no threat. He was a… *singular* leader.'

'Is it wise to leave a hostile force at large?'

'They abandoned their general, Kysen. They have no stomach for a fight. We can deal with them later, after Terra. We are rejoining the Warmaster's fleet. I want to look Grael Noctua in the eye when I present to him the head of Shadrak Meduson.'

TWENTY-FOUR

Caldera, the aftermath

A glittering expanse of icy tundra glided past the viewslit. It quickly gave way to seemingly endless tracts of desert before finally the edge of a sprawling ash waste, littered with ugly crags, deep craters and mountains, appeared on the horizon.

It had once been called Ibsen, though Imperial logisticians had classified it One-Five-Four Four.

Vulkan knew it as Caldera.

'A vast and fertile jungle existed here once,' said Vulkan. His tone left it unclear whether he was speaking to himself or to Zytos and Abidemi.

Neither had fought in this campaign, but they knew Numeon had. He had said little of the experience, only intimating its simultaneous success and failure.

'Two of my brothers and I came to this world, and still we could not save it.'

Vulcanis soared over a jutting mountain peak, and swept down into a deep valley basin. From their current altitude, structures of Imperial design could be made out. Blocky and functional, they were clustered together in self-sufficient units and surrounded by stockade walls.

'Settlers have at least made it their home,' offered Zytos, trying to lift his primarch's spirits.

Abidemi peered closer through another viewslit.

'I see no people,' he said.

Vulkan had noticed it too, his expression one of growing horror.

'Igen,' he voxed to Gargo in the cockpit. 'Bring us down. Do it now!'

The engine drone changed as Gargo pushed the gunship into a steep and swift descent. He did so unflinchingly in a manoeuvre that would have tested most

veteran Navy pilots.

Vulkan wrenched open the side door. A hot wind rushed in, battering the warriors inside and trying to tear them from the hold, but the Drakes were unmoved. None of them could take their eyes off the settlement below.

Ash from the mountains had painted the colony in a fine grey veneer, like dusty spiders' webs draped across the furnishings of a long-undisturbed house. Doors swung agape and bullet casings littered the craggy earth like seeds, though nothing would grow from them but the suggestion of a bitter fight.

Barricades had been erected in the main square. An oil drum lay upon its side, empty. Gun pits yawned emptily, their sandbag walls split and bleeding. A watchtower had collapsed across a section of the stockade, ripping it down the middle and forcing the two halves aside.

Gargo found a place to set down, a rocky plateau just beyond the settlement walls.

Vulkan crossed the rough terrain with an ease born of living amongst the volcanic crags of Nocturne, though this place was but a pale shadow of his adopted death world.

The gates to the stockade hung half-open. A warm, sulphurous breeze disturbed banners declaring Imperial loyalty. Several had been burned or defaced. The snap of fabric on the wind, and the crunch of dirt and debris underfoot were the only sounds.

Vulkan edged open the gates further to improve his view.

Then he waited at the threshold of the settlement, observing everything.

'I can see no survivors,' said Zytos.

He and Abidemi had followed the primarch as he had quit the gunship. Gargo had remained behind to shut down the engines and seal the hold, but he was coming now.

'Nor I,' said Abidemi.

'Because there are none.' Vulkan looked beyond the desolation of the place. Though the terrain had changed, burned away by the fires of compliance, the core geography had not.

Marks had been daubed on the sides of some buildings – not pronouncements or the crude graffiti of thugs, more like brands. The Warmaster's armies had come here, killing or capturing its inhabitants. The destruction was old, the perpetrators almost certainly long gone or the Drakes would have been attacked by now.

Mortarion would have known what the marks represented, though the brands

were Cthonian and not Barbaran.

Zytos recognised them too.

'Marr's fleet did this,' he said. 'It could only be him.'

'Then why not fortify it, and make it a staging ground?' asked Gargo, who had joined them from the ship.

Abidemi had sunk to one knee and ran the cracked earth through gauntleted fingertips. 'This land is better suited to growing crops than as an armoury.' He nudged a tiny piece of sharp, crescent-shaped crystal. 'Besides, I think they may have been dissuaded from staying.' He looked up at the others, showing off the piece of crystal. 'Dusk-wraiths?'

'No,' said Vulkan, his gaze alighting on a mountain ridge a few kilometres beyond the settlement. 'Their more enlightened kin. We fought them, Ferrus and I, and Mortarion…'

Zytos stiffened at the mention of that name. The others failed to hide their long-harboured aggression too. They had all fought the Death Guard more than once since the war began, and still carried the scars of those battles.

'This world belonged to the eldar once,' said Vulkan. 'We fought them for it, and believed we were liberating its peoples. We were wrong about that. We were wrong about a lot of things. The eldar have returned. Whether they fought the Sons of Horus or not, I don't think they liked what they saw here.' Vulkan gestured to the ridge. 'Past that rise is another depression. It's wide and empty. We can land *Vulcanis* there.'

He shut the gates. The metal protested, squealing on old hinges, scraping across a carpet of debris, but it could not resist him. They sealed closed with a dull funereal clang, a lid drawn across an empty coffin.

'What we seek is not in there,' he said.

Dense jungle, not a barren plain, crawled beyond the ridge line. Gargo landed at the very edge of the forest, the gunship's turbofans bowing the trunks of trees and fluttering the leafy foliage of a thick canopy.

Vulkan stepped from the hold, a look of consternation creasing his face.

Back when the Crusade had come to this world, they had burned this place, all the way down to the root. He had watched the flames with Ferrus from a scorched hillside. It had been years ago, but the growth he now saw went beyond exponential. It was unnatural. To have risen again so quickly…

He scowled, sensing an alien hand at work.

'It's here,' he said. 'The eldritch gate.'

‘In there?’ asked Zytos.

‘At its heart, Barek.’

‘I think perhaps the eldar do not want us to reach it,’ said Abidemi.

Vulkan hefted his hammer. Its head ignited into flame. ‘Then they are going to be disappointed.’

The darkness beckoned, arboreal and strange. Tall, tightly packed trees loomed over the Drakes, their trunks thick, their bark almost luminous, but doing nothing to alleviate the gloom. After taking what they needed from its armoury, the Salamanders left the gunship behind and entered the forest. Barely perceptible on the breeze was the sound of lilting laughter.

It had been several hours and slow-going but no ambush had been sprung, and no trap of any kind had beset them. At least not one the Drakes could see.

Zytos stood in a clearing, a shaft of milky sunlight kissing his armour and turning a patch of it red.

He listened, lowering the chainblade he had taken from *Vulcanis’* armoury for the first time. Mulch befouled its mechanism, making it drag, the teeth green and dripping. Garo and Abidemi carried chain weapons too, a spear of little use in clearing a jungle and a relic like *Draukoros* too fine to be put to so mundane a purpose. As ever, Vulkan stood alone, his hand upon the talisman, using it as a guiding lodestone.

The threat of equipment malfunction had forced them to stop. Only now, as the sound of whirring and cutting ceased did the silence begin to encroach.

‘I hear nothing,’ said Gargo, pulling strings of rancid plant matter from his axe.

‘Have you ever known any forest be so quiet?’ asked Abidemi. ‘No sign of creatures of any kind, no birds, no insects. This is an unnatural place.’

‘We are not alone, my sons. *They* are watching.’

All eyes went to Vulkan.

‘They?’ asked Gargo, his eyes darting from shadow to shadow but finding only darkness.

‘The eldar are here,’ said Vulkan. ‘I don’t think they ever really left.’

Zytos eyed the shadows. ‘How long?’

‘As soon as we passed the tree line. They are very quiet…’ He gave a feral grin. ‘But I hear them well enough.’

‘Are they hostile, lord?’ asked Zytos, and sent a thrum of activation through his blade that spun the teeth and spat loose the last of the plant matter.

‘Extremely. We aren’t wanted here.’

Gargo turned about again, his chainaxe held out in front of him.

'Then why haven't they attacked us yet?'

'Someone is holding them at bay.'

Zytos frowned. 'We have an ally?'

'I thought I imagined him, an old man dressed in rags,' said Vulkan, still gazing into the beyond. 'Now, I am not sure. Back on Nocturne he called himself "Deathfire", though I don't believe that's who he really is.'

'You think he's eldar?'

Vulkan's eyes burned in the gloom as they set upon Zytos.

'I do.'

'What would one of their kind want with us?' asked Gargo.

'That I don't know.'

'He comes to you in disguise, his motives unknown. Can we trust this creature?' asked Zytos.

'As far as we can trust any eldar,' said Vulkan. 'I cannot pretend to understand their minds but I sensed no mendacity. I fear there is no other choice *but* to trust him.'

'And that,' said Zytos, gesturing to the fulgurite shard sheathed at Vulkan's belt, 'do you trust that? Why keep it, father?'

Vulkan drew it. It was such a nondescript piece of stone, no larger than a gladius, but Zytos could feel a measure of the power it still contained. He wondered if it was dangerous.

'Everything has its purpose, Barek,' said Vulkan. 'Even this.'

No further explanation would be forthcoming. Perhaps there was none to give.

Vulkan put the fulgurite away again, though it had stirred something in him, as his mind appeared to wander.

'We should not linger,' said Zytos, unsettled. The chainblades were all clean. 'Can that compass get us to the heart of this jungle, lord?'

'It can, Barek,' Vulkan replied, holding up the talisman before him. The seven hammers upon its face slowly turned. 'I am just not entirely sure it *is* a compass.' He looked up, ignoring the questions in his sons' eyes. 'This way.'

The Drakes delved deeper and after a few hours the vague presence Vulkan had mentioned before, of being watched, faded and they were truly alone.

They emerged into a place where the canopy receded and the jungle lay open to the sky. The last rays of light ebbed above, slowly giving way to the ghosts of stars. Upon a shallow mound, and set into a dais of pale stone, stood an arch not

unlike the one they had passed through beneath Mount Deathfire.

Except here a warrior mounted on a strange scaled steed stood guard. He did not move when he saw the legionaries and their primarch approach through the forest, nor did he raise the arcane lance in his hand. Gemstones glittered in the hilt, capturing motes of sun and nascent starlight. Its speartip glowed.

A baroque helm hid his face, but his smooth segmented armour betrayed his origin as quickly as any banner or icon of allegiance.

An eldar stood before them, one of the Exodites.

Uttering a word in his alien tongue, the eldar spurred his lizard steed and approached to halfway between the arch and the forest's edge.

'Sheathe your weapons,' Vulkan said to his sons.

They obeyed, but kept a keen watch on the strange dragon knight.

Vulkan stowed his hammer, mag-locking it to his back and slowly approached the eldar. Once he was within a few paces, the dragon knight held up his hand.

Vulkan stopped, mindful of the other warriors in the forest around them that he could not see but sensed.

Sifting around in a pouch at his belt, the dragon knight pulled forth a shimmering silver seed as large as an acorn. He mimed putting the seed in his mouth and biting down. He then pointed to Vulkan and threw the seed, which the primarch caught, looked at once and ingested.

'I am not unfamiliar with the eldar tongue,' he said.

The dragon knight did not respond at first. After a few moments, he said, 'You will be unfamiliar with mine.'

'You understood me?'

The dragon knight gave a slow nod. He had yet to remove his helmet and spoke through its visor. It made his voice even more oddly ethereal and resonant.

'The seed of Isha is the root to understanding,' he said. 'You and your kind are not welcome here, Lord of Drakes, but the seer bids us let you pass.' He tilted his helm, a sneer behind that armoured visor not hard to imagine. 'And so we shall. But do not return to this place.'

'It would be unwise to threaten me,' said Vulkan.

The dragon knight gave a sonorous bleed of amusement, though his hand upon the lance trembled with anger.

Vulkan brandished *Urdrakule.* The dragon knight flinched but held his ground.

'This hammer has slain daemons, it has defeated primarchs and brought arch-tyrants to their knees,' said Vulkan. 'It is every hammer I have ever forged, because it is wielded by these hands. The spirits of these weapons are strong

within the metal.

‘Caldera is under my protection. Remain if you will. *Hide*, if you must. But do not raise arms against the sons and daughters of the Imperium. Did you watch as they were slaughtered?’

‘Your struggle is no concern of ours, though your race heralds the end days and the last songs. Isha weeps at the corruption you have unleashed.’

‘Your seer appears to believe differently. I can only assume you are his gatekeeper, here to grant us passage and return us to the path.’

The dragon knight did not answer. He reined his steed aside, though he reached to place the tip of his lance against the arch. A storm coalesced within it. Cold lightning and half-heard thunder raged. A chill wind formed hoar frost on Vulkan’s armour and the armour of his sons.

‘Did this gate not lead to darkness, lord?’ asked Zytos, warily eyeing the storm.

The dragon knight laughed. It took all of Vulkan’s resolve not to strike him down.

‘Have no fear, mon-keigh. The seer has ensured you will reach your path. But know this,’ the dragon knight said, looking at Vulkan. ‘Your death has been foreseen, Lord of Drakes.’ And with that he rode back into the forest as the effect of the seed of Isha faded.

‘Aye, it is a familiar concept,’ Vulkan replied, unconcerned as he and his warriors strode into the light and the fury.

TWENTY-FIVE

The last strand, cut

A stranger walked amongst the crop, coming out of the midday sun. He held a staff and leaned on it heavily as he made his way through the field.

The farmer watching the stranger paused in his labours, wiping the honest sweat from his brow with his sleeve, but kept the scythe to hand. Its sharp blade glinted in the hot sun. The air trembled and clouds gathered, presaging rain.

The stranger kept on going, but moved slowly.

Wounded, the farmer realised, or perhaps he was simply old or carrying a lasting injury. He had known soldiers who had done so. The memories of them and the places he had met them were vague, indistinct. More like impressions than true recollections.

Deep trenches, crowned by coils of barbed wire, mustard-yellow gas intruding, an ecstasy of fumbling. Hot jungles, men sweating away to bone. The harsh caress of a napalm sunrise. Endless deserts, dusty roadsides, forever wary of the incendiary devices in the burned-out carcasses of vehicles vanquished by aimless shelling. The reek of oil on the breeze.

The images felt unfamiliar. Almost borrowed.

The stranger did not look like a soldier. He did not even look like a man.

The staff he carried looked ordinary enough, but the loose robes hanging off his body had unusual runes woven into the fabric. The farmer thought he knew the language, but his memory failed him. It had been doing that a lot of late. Vestiges of old remembrances sometimes came to him in the night. Terrors, in truth – battlefields, blood and deaths, the old wars. By the time morning came, they had faded, but a mote of those nightmares lingered still. A storm was coming.

Adjusting his grip on the scythe's haft, he thought about hailing the stranger to ask him his business. He looked to the stoop of the agri barn.

For guidance? Permission?

But the smoking man who had been sitting there and watching him throughout the long afternoon had gone.

And then the farmer realised something as the stranger closed, coming towards him. Memories began to return.

'This is the storm.'

Eldrad let his hand drift through the ears of corn and the long grass, even though he knew it wasn't real. Not really.

Their soft barbs caressed his skin. The sun warmed his weary body. He had seldom felt pain as acute as this but then, he reasoned, *he* should probably be dead instead of Slau Dha. That had been foolish, and arrogant. He resolved not to make the same mistake with Prytanis.

'Where are you, Damon?' he hissed, his voice captured by the wind and echoed back at him.

The Perpetual had left the stoop.

He saw the other one up ahead. Diminished. A gentle psychic touch had begun to unweave his shrouded memories. Of Anatol Hive, of the asylum, of Nurth of Traoris, of Macragge… All cascading like coloured glass from a broken kaleidoscope.

Sudden movement, little more than a stirring of the wind, caught Eldrad's eye. Beyond the minor compulsion he had invested in the farmer, he found his psychic sight inhibited and realised the chamber must be shielded in some fashion. Either that or Prytanis was.

He murmured as much to his companion, though his gaze remained on the point where the long grass had moved, and hissed, 'Find him'.

Eldrad edged closer to the source of the disturbance, his route taking him away from the farmer. His time would come. Eldrad slowed, not just his gait, but his breathing, even his thoughts.

Ever so carefully, Eldrad drew his sword.

Something crouched there, in that long grass: poised, waiting.

Though it pained him, Eldrad sank down into a low fighting stance, his blade held close to his face, two-handed, the edge turned outwards like a spear pointing out prey.

'I have you…'

‘You really don’t,’ said a voice from behind him.

Eldrad turned, throwing up a hasty defence as a burst of hyper-velocity monomolecular discs scythed towards him. Most of the rounds broke apart or embedded in the psychic barrier, dropping down harmlessly as it dissipated, but one got through, cutting across Eldrad’s thigh and eliciting a cry of agony as he sank down further into the grass.

Wheat barbs lashed his face as he scurried away from the attack, chased by the whining drone of paired shuriken pistols. The rate of fire kicked out by the sling guns cut long tracts in the field and left a wake of severed stalks, but the seer evaded the deadly projectiles.

‘You’ve brought a sword to a gunfight, seer,’ crowed Prytanis. He was a slovenly man with an ill-favoured look about him. Even his voice had a swagger. Of all the immortal mon-keigh he had met, Eldrad disliked him the most.

Another scything burst pushed the seer deeper into the fields, and farther away from the farmer. He recognised the brace of sidearms, though his sight of them had been brief and under considerable duress. *Guh’hru* and *Meh’menitay*. Their names had grandiose and overly belligerent meanings. Slau Dha had never been one for subtlety, a trait that extended to his armoury, an armoury he had evidently extended to his lackeys.

Prytanis kept up a nigh-relentless barrage of fire but his efforts smacked of the experimental.

‘A little help here?’ Prytanis asked of his charge, but the farmer looked numb, beyond his reach.

Even injured, Eldrad could move fast. The human had already lost him, but spoke between bursts, hoping to goad his target into revealing himself.

‘I hear Gahet is dead. Can’t say I’ll mourn him. I liked him the least,’ said Prytanis. ‘And by least, I mean not at-*fugging*-all. And if you’re here – I mean *really* here,’ he added between two curt salvoes – ‘then Slau Dha must be dead too. I’m thinking that wasn’t easy. He had help. Protection.’

‘So do I,’ said Eldrad, and it was Prytanis’ turn to react to the voice behind him. He did, faster than a human had any right to, firing from the hip. A razor-edged storm spat from the guns cutting Eldrad in half, only for his hologrammatic simulacrum to flicker and reassert itself a metre to the left.

‘Clever. You took one of their *dathedi* suits,’ muttered Prytanis, just as a hulking figure in Legion war-plate emerged from the long grass.

‘And you brought a friend,’ he added, a little dismayed, and began to run.

At the same time a musical note sounded, incongruous against the bucolic

backdrop of chirruping birds and the gentle drone of insects reaping pollen.

As the dull, flat report of a rifle cut the air, Eldrad recognised the chime.

'More are coming,' he warned his ally, who paused in the action of sighting down his weapon. In the distance, Prytanis made for the cover of the agri barn, not so foolish as to match a pair of pistols – admittedly, extremely deadly pistols – against a Brontos-pattern legionary breech-loader.

The farmer stood still, seemingly unable to react. He wasn't able to. Eldrad had him, psychic dampeners or not.

Down, he sent, and the farmer dropped his scythe and disappeared beneath the golden wheat.

Barthusa Narek had reverted to a kneeling position, rifle braced over his right thigh, as six warriors in black fed into the chamber. Not a field at all, its false horizon had limits. The warriors had just emerged out of them. The first went down with a shot to her elliptical eyepiece. Blood spurted from the back of her head as the rear section of the helmet shattered. She dropped. The others spread out, segmented armour plate catching the sun. They returned fire, shredding the air and turning the field into a blizzard of flying wheat.

Eldrad heard a grunt as Narek took the pain. He heard him swear too, a Colchisian expletive he did not understand but which brought a smile to his lips regardless.

Fight well, Barthusa.

He did not see what happened next. He had his back to the fight, intent on the agri barn where he had last seen Prytanis.

If the warriors thought to stop him, no shots came his way. An eldar will always choose a mon-keigh as its enemy in preference to one of its own.

The agri barn loomed, oddly quiet despite the battle happening within earshot. Flat, hard rifle bangs warred with the high-pitched whine of rapidly dispersed flechette rounds.

Before he entered, Eldrad tried to find the farmer. He had become psychically visible since the seer had eased the bindings on his mind. He remained in hiding, instinct as well as impulse keeping him safe for now.

Prytanis proved much more elusive.

'Slau Dha taught you to guard yourself then,' whispered Eldrad as he stepped slowly, painfully onto the stoop.

It smelled of wood-chip and tree sap, the cloying aroma of sacked grain and spelt, as he passed under the arch of the door. Shadows loitered within, leavened only slightly by the faint shafts of simulated sunlight penetrating through the

beams above. A shallow creak ran throughout the floor as Eldrad stepped on an old board, resonating all the way to the wooden struts that held the barn several metres off the ground.

Metal storage bins and old agricultural equipment crowded an otherwise expansive floor space. It churned and rattled, shaking with recent activation and anointing the heady scents of the fields with the more industrial reek of burning oil and dusty machinery.

A stairway led off into an attic space above. Farming tools had been stacked beneath it. Ahead, a trapdoor set into the floor led down.

Eldrad made for it.

He clenched his fist and the trapdoor shattered into splinters. Through the ragged gap, he found another stairwell. This one led down into penumbral gloom. Chains rattled in the basement space, the hooks on their ends clinking against one another in the breeze flowing from above.

Eldrad had almost reached the last step when Prytanis came at him. Eschewing the sling guns, he went with a short-pattern chainsword instead. Eldrad barely made the parry, sparks spitting between whirring metal teeth as they cut the edge of his witchblade.

In desperation, he threw out a telekinetic pulse that sent the chains lashing but which Prytanis deftly avoided. A thrust with the chainsword gored Eldrad's thigh, shredding his robes and cutting flesh. He screamed, in both shock and pain. He had expected the duel to be swift. Without the psychic inhibitors retarding his abilities, he could have crushed Prytanis with a thought. As it was, his powers were much reduced, practically that of the lowliest warlock.

+Narek,+ he sent, retreating farther into the darkness, letting the hooks nip at his skin, belatedly realising he had also said the name aloud.

'Your hired muscle is otherwise engaged,' said Prytanis. 'What are you even doing here, seer? You can't exactly kill me.'

'I need to cut… another strand,' said Eldrad, clamping a hand over the wound in his thigh to staunch the blood. A thought knitted the skin, but left it taut and sore. He limped into the shadows, gathering them around him, making it difficult to be seen.

'Smart,' he heard Prytanis say, 'but I can disappear too…'

Silencing the burring chainblade, he blended into the darkness.

For a few moments, even the ambient sounds of the field and the distant battle faded, leaving Eldrad alone with his ragged breathing.

That tranquility did not last.

‘So you’ve turned then?’ asked Prytanis, his voice echoing from the left.

Eldrad stood his ground, ignoring the bait.

‘Cheap tricks,’ he said, wary.

‘Just doing my job, seer. Like you should be.’

‘You are insouciant, even for one of your blind race.’

‘You would not be the first to mention it.’

Eldrad still couldn’t detect him. The cellar *seemed* large, far larger than it had appeared from the upper floor based on the outer walls of the barn above. Threats lurked in every shadow.

‘And if I told you what you had been fed was a lie, that there was another way?’

‘I take my orders from the Autarch, you know that.’

‘Slau Dha is dead.’

‘Then his last orders stand, which do not, I am sorry to say, include helping you.’

‘And what about the other one? He who you have been set to watch.’

That provoked a twitch, a subtle movement Prytanis had not intended. Eldrad crept towards it.

‘What about him? Your plan *fugged* him to hell and back. He’s mortal now. No more do-overs.’

‘Not all men want to live forever. What do *you* want, Damon?’

‘Bargaining? Shit, you must be desperate. How badly did those klowns cut you?’

Deep, thought Eldrad but said nothing. He crept closer, but the impression of movement kept shifting, confounding his efforts.

‘What do *I* want?’ asked Prytanis, his voice echoing from left then right and back, impossible to pinpoint. ‘A drink might be nice. Out of this rustic nightmare runs a close second, though.’

‘I can give that to you. Release. Help me. Help *him*. There is a third way.’ Eldrad raised his sword, a hook plinked lightly off the blade.

‘No can do, I’m afraid. Orders, see.’

Prytanis leapt out of the darkness. Somehow he had got *above* Eldrad and descended upon him, the chain-teeth of his weapon hungering.

A hulking figure smashed throughout the cellar wall, leaving a ragged hole that bled in the light.

Narek took Prytanis in a sweeping charge, lifting him bodily across the cellar floor. The chainsword stabbed down repeatedly, but Narek would not be

dissuaded. Flechettes protruded from his armour like little razored nubs. Bleeding from half a dozen cuts carefully made through the vulnerable mesh joints in his war-plate, Narek thrust Prytanis through the opposite wall and threw him back out into the field.

Prytanis bounced hard, an ankle bone breaking audibly, a rib or two likely fractured, then rolled up onto his feet. Remarkably, he still had a hold of his weapon but dropped it in favour of the pistols holstered at his hips.

Muzzle flare streaked like a fiery smear as he moved. He had already begun to regenerate, the ankle bone fused and knit. It barely slowed him down.

Narek held up his arm, warding off the hasty burst fire, shards embedding in his vambrace. He bounded after Prytanis, who shot as he moved, one arm behind him, firing blind. Narek leapt over a salvo, rapidly covering the distance between him and his prey, then slamming down.

Prytanis arrested his run, pulling up short and diving out of harm's way, pistols tucked beneath his body as he rolled and the earth caved in his wake.

Narek swiftly rose from the crater he had made, drawing and swinging his gladius in one fluid movement.

Prytanis bent back on his heels, arching his spine and folding his knees just enough that the legionary blade missed his body, taking only three buttons from his jacket. They had barely hit the ground before he was moving again.

Narek lunged and thrust, trying to find extra reach but Prytanis wove aside from that blow too. He rolled backwards, foot over head, and made enough room to bring up *Guh'hru* and *Meh'menitay*.

The gladius suddenly impaling his left palm spoiled Prytanis' aim.

Narek glared, his right arm still extended from the throw, fingers loose.

Prytanis wrenched out the blade with effort, then wielded it in his uninjured hand. It looked cumbersome.

'If I jam this in your eye, will it kill you?'

Narek smirked. 'Try, and find out.'

'I will.'

Prytanis lunged, fast.

Narek moved faster. He trapped his opponent's arm with one hand, and seized Prytanis' throat with the other.

'You're a big, ugly bastard,' said Prytanis, struggling to breathe, to speak. 'Anyone ever told you that before?'

Narek stared, unmoved. 'Legion weapons are heavy,' he said, 'burdened with the blood from the lives they have taken. Mine is weightier than most,' he added,

and snapped Prytanis' neck.

The Perpetual fell limp in his grasp and Narek let him go. He had dropped his rifle near the agri barn and saw it waiting for him, nestled in the wheat.

Eldrad staggered into the light, still bleeding despite his best efforts to heal himself.

'A toll has been taken,' he whispered, and gritted his teeth as he closed on where the farmer was hiding.

'John,' he called.

Grammaticus emerged from the golden wheat.

'I won't lie, it has been a pleasant fiction,' he said, when Eldrad was close enough to hear it. 'Is any of this real?'

'It was real to you.'

'I suppose.'

Pale wraithbone had begun to show through the gaps in the wheat and grass. The sun took on a more artificial cast, as of strange lumens, and seemed to lose its natural warmth. The agri barn remained, a fabricated structure placed here to complete the illusion.

Grammaticus glanced over to where Prytanis had collapsed, flinching slightly when he saw Narek. The legionary barely acknowledged him as he retrieved the rifle.

The long grass near to where Prytanis had fallen began to stir…

'You are allies?' said Grammaticus to Eldrad, incredulous. 'He tried to kill Damon and myself. Is that why you're here now, to finish what he started on Macragge? Now I've done your dirty work for you.'

'Barthusa Narek has another purpose, John. Your death isn't it.'

Grammaticus shrugged, though he appeared far from convinced. 'I guess I should feel relieved.'

'*You* have another purpose,' Eldrad confirmed.

'And now I'm back to being terrified and colossally annoyed.'

Eldrad stared, unmoved by the human's histrionics.

'Where is the human Ollanius Persson?'

'How the hell should I know?' replied Grammaticus, his attention half on the legionary as he loaded a round directly into the rifle's breech. Even at a distance, it didn't look to Grammaticus like an ordinary bullet.

'You recognise the ammunition, don't you, John.'

Grammaticus nodded, eyes still on Narek. 'It's smaller than I remember. No

mistaking its power though.'

'That which cannot die can be slain by the fulgurite or its shards.'

'You've used it?' Grammaticus looked away, back to the seer, as the corpse of Damon Prytanis began to rise, renewed…

Eldrad nodded.

'It has severed more than one immortal thread.'

A shot reported across the field, echoing strangely in the false idyll of rurality the eldar had made for their 'guest'.

Grammaticus did not flinch, and Eldrad could tell by his eyes that he knew Prytanis was dead. Really dead this time.

'It can do that?'

'It has done and *will* do a great many things,' said Eldrad. 'It has been seen.'

Grammaticus tried to hide his shock.

Eldrad felt a sliver of grief in Grammaticus at the death of Prytanis. To see what he thought was inviolable undone must have shaken his belief, and they were old comrades too, Eldrad supposed.

'And the mission on Macragge, the one you gave me,' said Grammaticus. 'Did it work?'

'Vulkan lives, I believe is the phrase.'

Grammaticus said nothing for a few seconds, and Eldrad felt a measure of peace in him, but with that came the memory of Macragge and of what he and Prytanis had shared there, fighting side by side.

'Did you really have to kill him?'

'Damon Prytanis was a wretch, even when considered amongst your wretched species.'

'Yeah, but did you *have* to kill him?'

'His death no longer occludes the skein.'

'And mine?' asked Grammaticus. He leaned in and spoke behind his hand, mockingly conspiratorial. 'And I'm not even going to pretend I understand what the hell you just said to me.'

Eldrad smiled, though he found humans perturbing.

'Your death will be your last, John.'

'And what's to stop me taking it now and not doing whatever it is you need me to do?'

'Your inherent morality, of course. That and a lingering sense of a task unfinished.'

'You are placing a lot of faith in my morality.'

‘It would not be the first time.’

‘True,’ Grammaticus conceded, and looked askance at Narek striding across the field towards them. A visible shiver passed through him.

‘I won’t lie to you, your fiend over there just killed a man I thought was unkillable, protected by an ancient cabal that you have apparently been executing for some reason. I am just about cogent enough to have this conversation, but apart from that I am increasingly losing my grasp on rational thought.’

‘Can you find him, John?’

Despite his protestations, Grammaticus knew to whom the seer referred.

‘Are you going to kill him too?’

‘No. Damon was the last.’

‘Then perhaps. Maybe.’

‘You must, John. Or he you. That part is still… vague. He will only trust you.’

‘And you’re surprised by this? Why have you done this? Why did you need me to bring that primarch back from the dead?’

Eldrad laughed.

‘Is that funny? I don’t understand eldar humour.’

‘Only here at the end, do you have questions.’

‘Oh, I’ve had them throughout. I was just too damn scared to ask them.’

Eldrad nodded. ‘Very well, though there is little time.’ He glanced to Narek, who shook his head, standing sentry in the wheat stalks slowly bending in the breeze. ‘The Gorgon fell. His death sent a ripple across the skein. Fate had been altered, his destiny unwritten. I erred and placed my faith in the wrong son. I looked to fate again, and found another. One who had first to die. And then be reborn.’

‘Vulkan.’

Eldrad raised an eyebrow in curious amusement.

‘The capacity remains for rational thought, after all.’

‘Is that a joke?’

‘An observation. Vulkan must prevail, and take his place by his father’s side. Horus must be defeated.’

‘Those are both, pretty much, gods, regardless of what your theistic position might be on such things. Not sure how I can help with any of that.’

‘Your role is crucial. I have seen it.’

‘That skein of fate again?’

Eldrad nodded once more.

‘You and Ollanius Persson have a role to play. An important one.’

‘For the record, I don’t like this,’ said Grammaticus. ‘Any of it. In fact, I actively bloody hate it.’

‘It is Chaos. The will and whims of old gods. I have seen it, I beheld the Fall of my race. We were hubristic. Blind. Mankind is at once the greatest boon and the greatest threat to the Primordial Annihilator. Your souls. *Ours*. It hungers for them.’

‘This is madness. This is straight-up insanity.’

‘Have you ever seen what lurks beyond the veil?’ asked Eldrad.

‘I have seen it,’ Grammaticus said with a scowl, using anger to chase away his fear.

‘That is what awaits mankind if Horus succeeds. Daemons are real. Gods and magic are real. The old ways have returned and the flame of enlightenment dwindles.’

Grammaticus shook his head, still reeling. ‘And I can turn the tide? *We* can, Oll and I? What can we do? What use are men against gods?’

‘Your Emperor was once a man. Of a kind, at least. He had always placed great faith in men. It is fitting then that men should save Him.’

‘I think your race are over fond of poetry.’

Eldrad frowned.

Grammaticus shrugged and shook his head.

‘It doesn’t matter.’

He stopped talking as soon as the hulking presence of Narek drew near, stinking of oil and blood and heat.

‘More coming,’ he snarled, glancing down at the mortal as if remembering an insect that had dared to sting him.

Eldrad looked up. He felt them.

‘Your prison was isolated, John, but your gaolers are coming now. And in force. You can either remain,’ he said, looking back down at Grammaticus, ‘or you can prove you are the moral man I believe you to be.’

Eyes returning to the hazy distance, imagining the warriors soon to amass there, Eldrad delved within his robes and brought forth a rib of wraithbone studded with gems and inlaid with runic inscription, conjoined like circuitry.

He noticed Grammaticus looking at it.

‘It will open a path.’

Light flared, a maelstrom born from the very air, as the ritual was done. Eldrad rose from where he had driven the sharp tooth of the bone deep into the ground,

his robes stirred by an eldritch wind.

'What path?' asked Grammaticus, standing in the light, shouting against the storm. Tears were streaming from his eyes as the wind lashed his face. His hair tossed madly.

'A fork in the road, John. Here our fates diverge again,' said Eldrad, facing the storm.

Narek did the same, steady as a granite cliff, rifle slung across his back.

'*Our* fates?' he said, his voice harbouring an unspoken threat. 'You promised me retribution, xenos.' Narek began to unsheathe the gladius he had taken from Prytanis' corpse.

'You will have it, or at least the means to attain it. Taking it will be up to you alone.'

'If you are lying, witch…'

'Then there will be nothing you can do.'

'I'll find you.'

'I do not doubt it. Shall we?' said Eldrad.

'For mankind?' asked Grammaticus as he was about to enter the storm.

Eldrad nodded. 'For the Emperor,' he said dryly.

Grammaticus stepped into the light and let it take him.

They all did.

TWENTY-SIX

On Terra, hope fading

At Plaintive's Reach, order was failing.

Originally built as an outpost tasked only with observation, the Reach had been amalgamated with the rest of the Imperial Palace as part of its upgraded fortifications. Several outposts like the Reach watched every approach, at least by land. A curtain wall conjoined each one, a massive gate set every few kilometres. Stout buttresses protruded from metre-thick ferrocrete, further strengthened by ablative armour plate. Watchtowers manned with sentry guns or sniper rifles had been erected. A garrison was raised, and pre-fab barrack houses built to harbour troops not on patrol on the wall. Swathes of earth were excavated and flattened for the construction of landing pads. Gunships were made.

Lord Dorn decreed it, and the manufactorums of Terra's immense industrial districts toiled ceaselessly to obey.

The Reach was one of many, a sentinel wall, twenty metres high, bristling with guns.

Refugees from beyond the great Palace confines thronged every scrap of land outside. They sought succour. Some were pilgrims. Others came for profit, hoping to leech off desperation and credulity. A few belonged to nomad tribes who lived a solitary existence, but had been driven by atavistic survival instinct towards the civilisation they so loathed.

Standing on the wall, behind battlements of steel and stone, Vohan Gethe had seen every shade of humankind crawl from the wastes, disparate but all sharing in one thing.

Fear.

Of the Warmaster.

Gethe had heard reports of worlds sundered by the renegade warfleet, of worlds broken by the mere rumour of invasion. Given the volatility at the Reach, manifesting as a sense of palpable discord that could spill into violence at the slightest provocation, he could well believe those reports.

His enforcers manned this stretch shoulder-to-shoulder, the 87th precinct 'Peacemakers', and as their warden-primus he was responsible not only for them but also the poor bastards amassing below.

A great clamour rose up from the base of the sentinel wall, reminding Gethe of his duty. Below, the army of the unwashed demanded entry.

Gethe had no intention of acceding to such demands. At the Reach, his men were the first line of defence, part of the newly formed Adeptus Arbites, keepers of order and upholders of the Lex Imperialis.

Behind him lay the sprawl of the Petitioner's City, and the shadow of the great Palace itself. Though far away, its majestic spires and monolithic cityscape were easily visible, even out here at the extreme periphery. The statues of generals and primarchs loomed amongst the soot-stained gilt and ornate architecture. They held swords and banners, thrust proudly to the sun, or stood at either end of arched processionals where the teeming masses of Imperial citizenry scurried and hurried like ants in expectation of fire.

Horns sounded often – a call to order, a signal of a labour shift begun or ended, a trumpeting of resolve and an urging to be stalwart in the face of a terror as yet unrealised.

Gethe had dreamt of the spires of Terra, of its golden reaches, its triumphal squares, its memorial gardens, its great fountains and endless colonnades. He had seen little beyond the Petitioner's City, and but a fraction of that besides. His duty had kept him on the wall, so he imagined what it must be like as he watched flocks of winged cherubim-servitors take roost in lofty bell towers or perch on the outstretched fingers of statues. It was as oppressive as it was breathtaking.

Much of the beauty was fading. Even from the wall, Gethe could see it. The artisans must have wept, Gethe thought, when their murals and frescoes were torn down, replaced by plasteel and ferrocrete. Fluted spires were beheaded and turned into gun emplacements, ornamental fountains into ammunition silos. Some of this Gethe pieced together from what he could see through his monocular lens. The rest was all too plain to observe.

Terra had turned aside its golden face and hidden it behind a dour, armoured mask. As grim as that was to behold, it was a different world entirely to the one

that now existed beyond the wall.

Horus was coming, so it was said. Though whispered, the news had bred a madness in some men that Gethe thought unnatural. There had been recent incidents, not just at the fringes, but within the Inner Palace confines too. Murder, purges, mass suicides, even rumours about cults loyal to the Warmaster had arisen in recent days.

Terra's resolve, or at least that of its common citizens, had become stretched.

How long before it snaps? Gethe wondered. *Perhaps it already has, and we just don't realise it.*

The Imperial Fists remained aloof. If he trained his monocular lens on the distant Eternity Wall, he could see their golden forms, either stood sentinel or pacing back and forth. He wondered if they were restive. Did Space Marines even feel anxiety? They dealt with tension differently to ordinary men. Petitions had been made to them. And ignored. Or perhaps they simply went unheard, as one voice can become lost amidst a cacophony of screaming.

Static gun emplacements surveyed the crowd. Augurs surveilled them. An army of enforcers stood ready at Gethe's command. He did not feel confident they could marshal the sea of despair below them, and had often imagined it rising above the lip of the wall and crashing down upon its meagre defenders, sweeping them away, sweeping everything–

'How many people do you think are down there now?' asked Ebba Renski.

Renski wore a charcoal-grey carapace breastplate over black arbitrator fatigues. Rank markings had been picked out on the metal in white. Sweat leaked down her neck from where her helmet slowly cooked her scalp, its flare visor slanted upwards as she sighted down a monocular lens, squinting against the low sun casting its blood-red rays across the Reach.

'Last count, we were pushing fifty thousand,' Gethe replied, pleased for a distraction from his maudlin thoughts.

Renski whistled, lowering the spyglass.

She stood with one hand resting on the pommel of the shock maul hooked on her belt, the other lifting her helmet a little to let in some air.

'They have made another city down there, warden-primus,' she said.

Gethe did not doubt it. The refugees had been camped outside for the past two months, the masses agglomerating fresh followers by the day. Tents and other makeshift structures had sprung up during that time as the men and women camped outside the wall realised they would be refused entry and were likely in for a long wait before that situation changed.

A crude society had developed. Vendors had come. Trade had been established. It happened fast, but it had done nothing to alleviate the pressure from the pilgrims at the wall, who jeered and begged and threatened, desperate to be let in.

It was no different above. The atmosphere around Terra was choking with ships, and not just the monitors, augur stations and defence platforms; a host of vessels fleeing the advance of the Warmaster waited beyond the Ardent Reef, a shoal of monolithic gun batteries carved into the asteroid field girding the planet. The Throneworld represented perceived safety, hope of survival against the coming storm.

Gethe had never seen the stars. He feared the void, and the snatched stories of rogue traders and wayfarers who had passed through Terra and travelled its reaches did nothing to allay that fear. He had spent his life in search of solidity, of permanence and order. The Lex Imperialis provided that. It had shielded him, but the beyond felt far closer than it ever had before. Not so remote now, the coldness of space. Even in the heat of the wastes, it chilled him. Gethe's place was on the ground, on the wall. He clutched the edge of the battlement, and felt reassurance.

'Anything else, other than the boiling of desert carrion and an atrocious lack of concern for hygiene, Proctor Renski?'

The smell emanating from below reached as far as the top of the wall, losing nothing of its potency for the distance travelled. Stale sweat warred with urine and excrement. It was terror of what might come and the belief that the walls could protect them from it.

'Nothing I can see from up here.'

They had abandoned crowd sweeps when the sheer amount of refugees had made it logistically impossible. Anything could be building below the wall, and the first Gethe and his troops would know of it would be when it happened. The thought failed to improve his mood.

'I could ask Nade to make a sweep?' suggested Renski.

Gethe rubbed his chin, and felt the need to shave. Bathing would not go amiss either, unless he wanted to smell like the wretches below. He nodded.

'Do it.'

The Valkyrie gunships stood at permanent readiness on a purpose-built landing pad situated behind the wall. Air sweeps were generally conducted every few hours, but occasionally the frequency increased according to the prevailing mood of the crowd.

At that moment, Gethe would classify that mood as volatile.

'Just send up one. A quick pass, that's all.'

A few minutes later, the forbidding shadow of the Valkyrie was passing over the refugee masses like the spectre of death. Some wailed at its appearance. Others beseeched it, a roaring metal god of the sky. Most ignored it, or simply sneered.

Nothing came of the patrol.

Gethe felt old, his skin loose, his bones weary. War took a toll, or at least, the expectation of one did.

Nade's voice crackled over the vox-bead in Gethe's ear.

'*Warden-primus,*' the pilot began, turning the gunship, on approach for the return leg.

Then the Valkyrie's engine exploded, shot out by an unknown attacker.

A fading rocket tube contrail provided little clue.

'Throne!' Gethe rushed to the edge of the battlement for a better look at what had happened.

Fiery debris rained down in advance of the flyer, which ploughed into the earth, churning the ground and cutting down a swathe of refugees like wheat. Dozens were killed. Even more injured. Panic set in, rippling outwards as shock lessened its grip, before the gunship finally came to rest in a burning furrow. People ran. Some were crushed underfoot. Fights broke out. Like an infection, the chaos spread. Distant gunfire echoed. There was screaming.

'Nade!' Renski was already on the vox, trying in vain to raise the pilot.

Gethe could only watch as he smelled burning flesh on the breeze, which had uncharitably decided to carry the stench in the wall's direction.

He had been about to issue a command, when an explosion sent a tremor through the wall. Renewed screaming followed. The explosion had come from below, far enough away from the gunship to rule it out as the cause. Smoke and flame obscured its origin. More panic. More wailing, though the refugees had left the vicinity of the wall now. Those who could, those who lived or still had use of their legs.

What followed was bloody. Not just running, a stampede. The edge of the wall cleared, revealing bodies. Some of them had been dismembered by the blast. Gethe looked away.

'What was that?' he said, urging men to the battlements, ignoring the requests for information over the vox from farther down the wall. 'Snipers on the crowd,' he snapped through the vox instead, and the three watchtowers and the riflemen

within made ready.

The refugees cried out, some pointing to the shining muzzles of the sniper rifles. Others bellowed angrily, but fell back.

Smoke still trailed from the blast site. Gethe suspected a bomb but couldn't be sure. Reacting immediately before he possessed the facts would be a mistake. He had to remain calm, and transmit that calm to his men. There were stills below making grain alcohol, vendors cooking meat on old fyceline stoves; any one of them could have exploded. It had felt big, though, something specifically made for impact. Powerful enough to be felt all the way up on the battlements.

'Don't they realise they can't breach the wall?' said Renski.

'Let's take no chances, eh, proctor?' said Gethe.

'Was it an attack?' asked Renski.

'Inconclusive.'

'We should do something, warden-primus.'

'Nothing we can do right now. I won't act in haste. Can you feel that tension, proctor?'

'Sir?'

Gethe shook his head ruefully. 'You could cut it with a knife. I won't stretch it any further. We wait, urge calm only. Let the clamour subside.'

Several minutes passed of the warden-primus addressing the crowds via loudhailers, of holding the line in preparation for what might happen next. He ordered the reserves from the barrack houses. They waited in the courtyard, on the Palace side of the wall, in case of a breach.

It took almost an hour before most of the bodies were cleared, dragged to Throne only knew where, and the refugee masses returned.

'What about Nade and Uli?' asked Renski.

A mob had descended on the crashed Valkyrie, stripping the wreckage for parts, looting whatever remained.

'They must be dead, Renski,' said Gethe. 'Nothing we can do for them now.'

'We should try to retrieve their bodies.'

Gethe gestured to the crowds. The mood below remained volatile but the immediate panic was over. He relaxed his grip on the battlements, hoping the threat had diminished too.

'You want to go down there?'

Renski gritted her teeth, her ideals meeting reality and coming up wanting.

'Neither do I,' said Gethe. He looked further into the wastes. More refugees were coming. 'Get me the master vox,' he said.

‘Sir?’

‘The master vox, damn it! I’m trying the Legion again. And I want every other warden-primus on this wall. This could be happening elsewhere too.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Renski was about to go when Gethe stopped her.

‘And issue a recall order. I want every man back on the wall. Something is going on here. We just can’t see it.’

‘And then what, sir?’

‘Soon as we’re reinforced, we open the gate and take a closer look.’

TWENTY-SEVEN

Of the Impossible City, in its ruination

There was no sun, no sky and the golden light of this place radiated no warmth.

The gate Vulkan and the Drakes took from the eldritch forest had led them here, to another realm.

Even the air felt strange. Sound did not travel as it should, as conventional wisdom would dictate. At times it echoed for impossibly long periods, at others it bled away as if submerged beneath an unseen ocean.

'What is this place?' asked Gargo, his auspex readings baffling and contradictory.

A tunnel stretched before them, so wide they could barely perceive its edges, its ceiling as high as a celestial vault, and the way ahead obscured by a gilded fog.

Shadows loomed in the miasma as the Drakes made their way carefully forwards, weapons ready, eyes searching but finding no enemies. Yet a threat still lingered. Blood had been shed here, souls severed.

The hollowed-out carcasses of dead gods and their servants emerged as the Salamanders walked on, their forms sprawled amongst the ruins of a fallen civilisation.

'Look there…' said Abidemi, his voice a distant susurration, even though he was only a metre or so away from his brothers when he gestured with his sword.

A great Titan slumped in quiet repose – a Warhound variant, its head lying on its chin, the rear and legs hunched up behind it like a surly dog. A black griffon with a white hood set against a yellow field was painted onto its carapace. One of its weapon mounts had been destroyed, an inferno gun, its muzzle black from overheating. The other had been bitten off, teeth marks visible in sacred metal.

Gargo approached the machine and ran a bionic hand across the wound,

engaging haptic sensors in his fingertips.

'A residue lingers, something in the saliva, I would guess.'

'Acid, machine oil?' suggested Zytos, unnerved by the spectacle of such a war machine brought low.

Gargo shook his head.

'I can make no sense of it, brother.'

'Whatever it was, it severed the arm of a Titan,' said Abidemi. 'What manner of thing could do that?'

'Nothing we here would want to face,' uttered Vulkan. He stood forward of the slain Warhound, his gaze on the fog ahead.

'And where is *here*, my lord?' asked Abidemi.

'A conduit,' said Vulkan. 'A place that is entirely other.'

'The warp?' asked Zytos.

Vulkan shook his head. 'Something else.' He crouched down to touch a sheet of plating under his feet. 'This is Mechanicum forged,' said Vulkan. 'I had heard rumours… My father's great labour, after he made Horus Warmaster.'

'I don't understand, lord,' said Zytos.

Vulkan stood, leaning on *Urdrakule'*s haft. He gazed off into the fog again.

'Though I see the hand of Mars, this place once belonged to the eldar.'

'And did *it* bring us here, or did you?'

Vulkan looked down to the talisman of seven hammers.

'What are you asking, Barek?' said Vulkan as he regarded his son.

Zytos met his primarch's gaze and held it, though it took some effort to do so. 'Can we trust it?'

Vulkan's expression was curious.

'It was wrought by my hand.'

'A feat you have no memory of.'

As if realising the significance of that fact for the first time, Vulkan turned his attention back to the talisman.

'Regardless,' he said, 'we have no choice but to follow it.'

Everything has a purpose, Vulkan had said.

The talisman's was to act as a compass, but to where?

And guiltily, in that moment of doubt, Zytos was reminded of another's words – Abidemi's, spoken in the underworld below Deathfire.

Is it him?

The talisman brought them to the edge of a city, though it was unlike any city the

Drakes had ever known.

Bone-white spires shimmered in the golden light, spearing upwards like perfect stalagmites and then down like stalactites, as if the city had somehow *curved* and arched over itself.

White-slabbed avenues fed cathedrals, temples, colonnades and amphitheatres. They stretched to every point of the compass, lost to a pale gloaming. These too loomed overhead, folded upon the same structures below, but cast no shadow. Where darkness did fall, it felt *wrong*, the angles at odds with the direction of the light. Some of the shadows looked like the silhouettes of people.

At the threshold of the city, in the lee of a gigantic statue of a weeping maiden, Abidemi crouched to one knee to run his gauntleted hand through a veil of mist.

'It… *sings*,' he said, incredulous, tendrils of vapour clinging to his fingers as if reluctant to disengage. 'I cannot understand the words, but I feel… *such* sorrow. A lament, brothers.'

Zytos had heard it too. Whenever they passed through the mist, the voices came, soft and lilting. This was a city in mourning.

'Dead words for a dead people,' he whispered, the funereal quiet affecting him.

'Why are her hands open?' asked Gargo, his eyes on the statue.

'She is a daughter of the eldar,' said Vulkan, coming to stand amongst his sons. 'She both welcomes you and pleads to you.'

'For what?'

'I believe it's salvation,' said Abidemi.

'I see evidence of the Mechanicum's influence here too,' said Zytos, changing the subject. He referred to the metal conductor plates and arcane mechanisms wrought into the tunnel walls, the devices that encroached upon the city's threshold.

As he looked across the city, at the ruin that it had become, he discovered something else of its history.

'A battle has been fought here.'

Several walls had collapsed, a tower lay fallen across a broken colonnade. Gun emplacements had been abandoned, vehicle husks left to rot.

'One which mankind lost,' said Vulkan. 'We should not stay.' He held the talisman on its chain before him as if to divine their path. 'Our way lies through it.' He glanced at the statue. 'Be on your guard, my sons. It was hubris for the Imperium to think it could conquer this place. It reigns here no more. Something else now holds sway.'

As they passed through the city's broken gates, Abidemi paused, reaching for

the hilt of *Draukoros*.

'Can you feel that?' he asked of his brothers and father, the words repeating and then sharply dropping flat.

'As soon as we crossed the border,' said Zytos.

'I see and hear nothing, brothers,' answered Gargo, returning the auspex to his belt.

'It is here.'

Zytos turned to his father. 'It?'

But Vulkan did not answer.

'A hunger,' said Abidemi.

Vulkan gave a shallow nod.

Zytos felt it too, a presence, something malign whose attention had been attracted. They all felt it now, but only Zytos gave voice to it.

'Something is coming for us.'

'It has been ever since we stepped from the *Iron Heart*'s teleportation dais,' said Vulkan. 'Foulness follows… We must stay ahead of it.'

They moved swiftly after that, though not without care as they ran through the alien ruins.

Vulkan led the way, pausing now and then to consult the talisman, its guidance apparently unerring.

After several hours – though time here did not run to convention, much like the light, air and gravity – they found the dead.

Mounds of renegades, their baroque armour split and gored, littered a sprawling plaza.

Off-white and blue, sea-green and bronze, nightshade, dirty iron, febrile green, crimson and gold – every traitorous hue had a representative. At the heart of it there rose a tower, a plated bastion of Imperial design utterly incongruous in the alien city, now surrounded by the slain. A stairway wound around the tower, corkscrewing up to a flat, battlemented summit.

The battlefield hung somewhere between what could be considered both 'up' and 'down'. Zytos found himself staring back at the part of the city they had just passed through, only it was now above instead of behind him.

He chose not to question it, as they made for the tower.

Cracked flagstones crunched underfoot, together with the detritus of spent shell casings. The mist had retreated here, lingering at the plaza's edge as if reluctant to trespass.

'What killed them?' asked Gargo. 'The dead must number in the hundreds.'

Abidemi held aloft a golden helm. The faceplate had a crack in it, right through the eagle device above the brow. A red horsehair plume fluttered forlornly from the crown.

'The Custodes were here.'

'They are still,' said Zytos, and gestured to an arm protruding from one of the mounds of the dead. It wore a golden vambrace, tarnished with blood. The gauntleted hand still gripped a guardian spear. 'And those of the Sisterhood.'

Several female warriors lay amongst the dead. By the position of the fallen, Zytos could imagine them fighting back to back until the end.

Vulkan did not look upon them. Even the slain heroes of his father's legion could not hold his attention. He looked to the shadows and the warriors slowly creeping into the light.

A ragged warband for sure, several mismatched squads, they cleaved to broken-toothed chainblades or drew notched swords. A few carried bolters, the clips absent, their ammunition spent. They did not look like the sword brothers the Salamanders had known during the Great Crusade, nor did they resemble the traitors of Isstvan. Sigils marked their armour, daubed in blood or carved by blades. A wheel of eight points, a star that represented madness.

'Do you see this?' hissed Zytos.

Abidemi nodded.

'No. Do you *see* it, brother? What they have become?'

'They are a future echo of something to come, something worse,' said Vulkan. 'This is what we are fighting against – not them, but *it*. Be wary, my sons. Something else clings to this place, something malignant.'

Scattered throughout the plaza, they came together by some lingering instinct, though whatever remained of the warriors they had once been appeared greatly diminished, and usurped by animalistic hunger.

One of the pack stepped forward, a broken chainaxe held too tightly in his grasp.

'*Blooooood for… ngg…*' he murmured, guttural, ravenous.

Acid drooled from beneath his faceplate, sizzling against bare metal. Both retinal lenses had been shattered, and what glared from behind those slits no longer looked human.

Zytos drew his hammer.

'Kill them all!'

Gargo let slip a wordless cry and threw himself at the ragged warband. A spear thrust impaled the drooling warrior, the Salamander's bionically augmented

strength enough to lift him off the ground as Zytos and Abidemi caught up and then charged ahead.

The renegades appeared slow, as if drunk, their movements sluggish. But they died slowly too, wounds that would ordinary kill a legionary proving unfit to stop them.

Abidemi disembowelled a Night Lord, the savage teeth of his blade making quick work of the renegade's armour. The thing that had been a son of Curze fought on, despite its grievous injury, forcing Abidemi to behead it before he engaged another.

Another fell to Zytos' thunder hammer, its shoulder crushed, the guard dented inwards and biting into the renegade's ribs and torso. A second blow lifted it off its feet, caving in its chest. Sprawled on its back, its internal organs pulped, it still stirred. Zytos finished it off with a stamp of his boot.

He then smashed into an Iron Warrior, the strike two-handed, splitting apart its breastplate and hurling it aside. He advanced. An uppercut sent a Word Bearer reeling, the prayer parchments nailed to its armour burning with the fiery discharge from the thunder hammer. He crushed the neck of a Death Guard. A thrust of the hammer's head broke its hip. Zytos stepped over the body, and Gargo followed in his wake to apply the killing stroke.

The Drakes fought together, and took no return blow.

Steadily they moved through the traitors, the tower at their backs, every death at their hands eliciting a small moment of catharsis and a pang of fratricidal guilt. This was the death of the Emperor's dream, this place in ruins, this war. All of it.

Blood splattered Zytos' armour. It smeared his drakehide cloak. The scent of it felt heady through his mouth grille.

He heard Gargo roar, and turned to see his brother's faceplate anointed with gore. He had torn the hearts from a World Eater, his bionic hand and forearm slick with vitae.

Behind him, Abidemi sawed *Draukoros* through the clavicle bone of a Night Lord, his labours eager.

The deaths blurred. Killing grew indiscriminate, losing meaning, collapsing into instinct and sensation. The grinding of bone, the hard spatter of blood, a spear impaling, a sword cutting, a hammer pulverising… A cacophony of murder resounded without reason.

Zytos felt it welling up within, a hot, red anger. He tipped back his head, the urge to wrench off his helmet strong, and a bellow almost escaped his lips…

‘Enough!’

Vulkan’s shout carried, despite the weirdness of the city. It broke the killing frenzy.

The renegades were dead. The last one fell to Gargo’s spear, flung as sure as an arrow into the traitor’s chest. He gasped for breath, only now aware of *Draukoros* about to cleave his neck.

Abidemi dropped the sword, appalled at what he had been about to do. It was the first time he had treated Numeon’s blade with anything but reverence.

‘Gargo… I could barely see, I thought you were…’

Gargo looked back at him, chest heaving with every oxygen-starved breath. Blood soaked his bionics and he paled at the sight of it.

Zytos ripped off his helmet, though the air was no better outside of its confines.

‘Father…’

They had dismembered and destroyed the renegades. A charnel field spread out before them.

Vulkan came amongst his sons, his merest presence radiating composure and restraint. Zytos felt it like a cleansing flame, burning away the black anger.

‘Now we know why the spirits would not enter,’ said Vulkan, glancing at the veil of mist lingering at the plaza’s edge. ‘The defilement of this place is far worse than I imagined.’

‘I felt… an urge to kill and kill again,’ said Gargo.

‘What have we stumbled into, father?’ asked Abidemi.

Vulkan eyed the false shadows.

‘An altar, my son,’ he said, and lifted *Urdrakule* to gesture to an encroaching darkness that had suddenly risen up around them, encircling the plaza and edging closer with each second. ‘And we are the sacrifice.’

Lurkers emanated from the ring of shadow, horned and rangy things, unravelling like smoke or spilling outwards like oil or ink. They shed the dark, a second skin, and emerged fully born to taint the golden light.

Dark as old blood, crimson and deoxidised, the creatures crept forwards on hoofed toes, their gait at once lithe and spasmodic. A snicker trickled from unnatural gullets. Their tongues tasted the air. A febrile heat bled off their muscular bodies like animal sweat. Needle teeth as black as cancers glinted. Eyes of sulphur-yellow narrowed in anticipation.

‘Dread foot-soldiers,’ said Abidemi, the clatter of the creatures’ dark blades and spears uncannily in time with his pronouncement. ‘Anger and death has brought them,’ he hissed.

‘They come for me,’ said Vulkan.

And as Zytos looked up at them, he knew his father was right.

‘The hunger, is this it?’ he asked. He had fought their kind before, daemons. Once on Macragge and again aboard the *Charybdis*, but they had been mortal flesh given over to possession of some kind, nothing like the creatures emerging from the shadows.

‘No,’ Vulkan told him. ‘They are just dregs.’ He sneered. ‘Wretches sent to keep us from our path.’

Zytos clenched his teeth, fighting the impulse towards violence, and heard them grind hard against his skull. He sank to his knees, wracked with agony.

‘I feel it come again, the rage…’

‘And I,’ said Abidemi, his fists tight and pressed against his temples.

Gargo grimaced, his arms held close to his chest. He had yet to reclaim his spear. Even *Draukoros* lay unclaimed amongst the dead.

‘We are from the fire born,’ Vulkan told them. ‘The heat of Deathfire burns in our breasts, and with it we shall vanquish all doubt. Hold to your purpose, sons of Nocturne.’

He stepped forwards, and like moths drawn to the light, the creatures converged on Vulkan, uninterested in the scraps behind him.

‘To me then, hellspawn!’ declared Vulkan.

He leapt, a single perfect parabola that saw him alight on the summit of the tower. The red-skinned creatures boiled towards the stairway, curling around it, a storm of hot blood.

Zytos could only watch. His armoured fingers scraped against the plaza floor and came away lathered in dust.

‘Something is written here…’

His impotent scratching had revealed something lying beneath.

‘Brother,’ said Abidemi, pointing upwards to where the primarch stood alone.

The creatures surged towards the Lord of Drakes, skittering up the steps, clambering atop and under it like maddened ants scurrying through a hive.

Vulkan lowered the hammer.

Abidemi grimaced in horror. ‘What is he doing?’

‘Father!’

Zytos cried out and reached for his thunder hammer.

A flood of the creatures poured around the Drakes, blind to their presence, intent only on reaching Vulkan.

Abidemi raised *Draukoros* with a whisper of apology to the blade, or to

Numeon, Zytos could not tell. Gargo unclamped his arms from around his body and reclaimed his spear.

Zytos regained his feet.

'Rage or not,' he said, 'I won't let our father face those things alone. We are sword dragons, the Draaksward.'

He turned to his brothers.

Abidemi touched *Draukoros'* blade to his forehead, mouthing a silent oath.

Gargo leaned heavily on the spear but found his strength again.

'For the primarch,' he said.

'Vulkan lives,' said Abidemi, readying his sword.

Zytos swung his hammer into both hands.

They attacked.

At first, the creatures ignored them. Even as they fell, struck down by the Drakes, they did not fight back. Only when Zytos gained the first step on the stairway did he meet resistance, strength and fury to rival a legionary.

'Stay together!' he roared above the chittering, grunting cacophony of the creatures.

As one, the Drakes slowly fought their way up the steps.

For a brief moment, Zytos lost sight of Vulkan, but as he reached the next bend he saw his father through a fleeting gap in the throng, standing with his hammer by his side.

'Why does he not fight them?' asked Gargo, having seen the primarch too.

Zytos had no answer. He booted a creature off the stairway into the churning red mass below, and saw the sigil he had partly revealed earlier.

Higher up on the tower, he now saw it for what it was: a wheel with eight points, only of a much larger and grander design than those icons worn by the dead traitors in their midst.

'A trap,' he said to his brothers.

'Our presence here was foreseen?'

'Yes, Atok,' Zytos replied, fending off a blow as Abidemi stepped in with the counter. 'Whatever is hunting us knew we would come here. They wanted Vulkan alone.'

'To kill him?' asked Gargo, holding off a dark blade with the haft of his spear.

'Something worse…' breathed Zytos.

The horde surrounded Vulkan but refrained from attacking him, the pain of their presence etched upon his face.

The thought appalled Zytos worse than any death his father could face. To be

corrupted, to become anything akin to the traitorous wretches they had just slain… It put a fear in Zytos he should not have been able to know.

'They mean to *turn* him.'

He fought harder, recklessly, and took a blow against his arm, another against his torso. Abidemi cried out, but Zytos barely heard him.

'We must reach the primarch!' he roared, but as they neared the summit of the tower the horde grew thick and carving through it was like cutting adamantium. 'Brothers!'

But Abidemi and Gargo fared no better.

Hope faded. To come to this place, to have crossed the galaxy only to die here…

The anger came again, barely held at bay. And as the killing went on without cease, even enhanced muscles began to tire…

Vulkan stood alone, and felt the regard of the daemons, for what else could they be but the beings his father had denied existed? Their fury pushed against him, gnawing at his resolve, not one essence but a gestalt, threatening to overwhelm him and plunge him back into madness and rage.

He thought of Isstvan and the terrors wreaked upon his sons. Of the betrayal by the hands of trusted brothers. Of poor Ferrus, a headless corpse lying in the blood of the massacre. Of Curze and the tortures he had inflicted. Of Nemetor, hung up like so much spoiled meat. Of the countless others, slain and defiled, of a galaxy turned to ruin and death.

Vulkan's grip tightened around *Urdrakule*. He had yet to raise it but felt the urge to now. The daemons aimed their blades towards him, their speartips and swords poised to kill, but did not strike.

Fury bade them murder, and yet also leashed them.

A relentless pounding sensation throbbed in Vulkan's skull, demanding release.

Is this how it is for you, poor brother? Poor Angron?

Reason became fleeting, instinct smothered it.

Vulkan closed his eyes, but the anger and his bleak imaginings would not abate.

Of Ferrus hacked apart, his bloody effigy raised to a darkened sky.

Of Perturabo and the cage he had fashioned.

Of Caldera put to the flame.

Of Numeon and the sacrifice he made…

Vulkan smiled, tears of grief streaming down his face.

He let the hammer fall, and heard the low chime of its head striking the ground.

He did not fear death; he never had. His renewed immortality had yet to be proven after his apotheosis in fire. Perhaps it would be disproven now.

He opened his eyes, and took the fulgurite spear from his belt. It felt warm to the touch.

Father, are you with me now?

'It took more than a hundred deaths to bring me to the brink of insanity before,' he told the creatures. Though they could not understand him, Vulkan saw a moment of hesitation, of panic.

'This is merely irksome.'

He lifted the fulgurite aloft and his would-be murderers watched it rise. They snarled at the captured glory of the anathema still bound within it.

Realising their abject failure, the creatures roared, turning their blades and spears upon the primarch.

But it was too late.

Everything has a purpose.

The daemon horde vanished, eclipsed in a coruscating light.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Beyond the wall, the hungering crowd

Gethe was no coward, but he had no desire to descend into the mob. His place was on the wall. The dubious honour of leading the patrol fell to Renski.

She had risen through the ranks of the arbitrators swiftly, even spending a little time with the Reeves, rooting out disorder and insurrection in the Petitioner's City. Only recently had she been posted at the wall, a duty not to her liking but one she fulfilled with professional pride nonetheless.

During her tenure with the Reeves, she had seen things. A man, a simple factorum labourer, who slew his entire family and hung the skinned corpses in his hab. The Reeves had found him sitting down eating a modest repast, while the fleshless dead looked on. The clerk who had brought a stubber instead of a data-slate to his place of work and left a bloodbath – his colleagues shot to death around him as he went about his normal duties, apparently heedless of the carnage. A freighter pilot who drove his rig into a densely populated hab district. Thousands died in the resulting crash, only for the pilot to calmly exit his armoured cab, light a lho-stick and sit down amongst the dead, waiting for the enforcers to take him.

After that, the depths of horror and debasement a man's soul could sink to held no surprises for Renski. It haunted her, and she could not forget those sights, but it held no surprises. Recent *disturbances* had challenged that conviction, though.

Ritual killings. The dead with symbols carved in their flesh, or arranged from their distended intestines or daubed in their blood. Mania on a massive scale. Fires that ravaged entire districts, some of which still burned. Riots motivated by nothing more than the desire to vandalise or inflict violence upon others.

Sickness plagued the more remote regions, something in the water or the

rations that no adept had yet managed to identify.

In their panic and despair, the citizens of the Petitioner's City had turned to avarice and vice, finding comfort only in lustful and excessive pursuits. As yet, only a small proportion of the overall population had been afflicted by one or all of these maladies, but the number was rising.

Renski had never been superstitious. She knew people who were and had mocked them to their faces, but even she could not deny the correlation between the alleged advance of Horus' fleet and the increasing descent into anarchy and madness. Fear was a rational reaction, she supposed. Man reverted to his baser instincts when afraid, but the gnawing dread that had seized Terra, perpetuated by the demagogues and the firebrands and the doomsayers, was slowly driving everyone insane.

So when the slab-sided hatch to the gunship closed, briefly swallowing her intercession squad in darkness, she felt a moment of disquiet and gripped her shock maul just a little tighter.

Three Valkyries set down on the other side of the wall, hitting the crowds with enough light and noise to force a landing zone. Door gunners maintained a constant watch every second of the drop, heavy stubbers panning the clamouring hordes, daring them to act.

Renski stepped off the trailing ramp of the lead gunship, jumping the last half-metre to the ground, the landing stanchions not quite touching earth. Backdraught from the engines buffeted her uniform and strained the comms. Vox crackle filled her ear-bead. She had hooked the shock maul to her belt, but kept a hand on her sidearm as she approached the blast site.

Twenty enforcers disembarked with Renski. The majority formed a cordon around their proctor as the gunships took to the skies again, thus removing any temptation the crowds might have to try and commandeer them.

'*Maintaining vigil*,' the pilot's voice said in her ear, clawing through the static.

Renski signalled an affirmative, her gaze straying momentarily to the wall and the line of armed enforcers Gethe had mustered to watch her back. At any rate, she hoped that's what they had been ordered to do.

Debris from the blast covered a large area. Renski found pieces of shrapnel and human remains, all bloody and burned. Working from the outside in, she followed the trail of carnage to find the origin point.

Nudging it first with her boot, she stooped to retrieve something from the debris and frowned.

Gethe's voice came through on the other end of the feed as she raised him on the vox.

'*Find something?*' he asked.

Renski held the broken outer shell of a krak grenade, an improvised one by the looks of it.

'It wasn't an accident,' she said, looking out through the gaps in the defensive cordon to the crowd beyond. Their hungering, wide-eyed expressions did little to alleviate her concerns. A few had started shouting, calling out in fear and anger. 'What do you want me to do?'

There was a long pause as Gethe considered his answer. Renski could hear his heavy breathing from the other end. He sounded scared.

'Warden-primus?' she pressed after almost a minute.

'*Hold position, proctor. You will be reinforced momentarily.*'

'And then, sir?'

'*Find out what really happened. I want to know if there's a connection between the Valkyrie and the bomb. Root out who's responsible.*'

'With respect, there are over fifty thousand people down here.'

'*Someone knows something. That's fifty thousand potential witnesses, proctor. The perpetrators will be close, and couldn't have acted alone. Find them, Renski, or find out what they're planning. The wall is not safe until you do.*'

Gethe cut the feed. Renski was far enough out from the wall that she could still see him twenty metres above, his hands on the edge of the battlements, looking into the sea of bodies.

The gunships returned, and brought others. Eight vessels in all, almost the entire complement set down around Renski's men, radiating from their insertion point. The crowd retreated, battered by sirens and the harsh glare of search lamps that had grown colder since the sun had dipped in the sky.

Renski's command went from twenty to two hundred. She was met by a fellow proctor, who hurried over to her as the rest of the enforcers were still being disgorged from their transports.

His name was Brankk. While less experienced, he was still a capable officer, in Renski's opinion.

'Ten-man squads,' she told him, shouting above the sound of the Valkyries' engines. 'Twenty stay here to maintain our point of egress. I want loudhailers to keep the crowd informed and calm.'

Brankk nodded, his eyes firm and his gaze unwavering, to show he had taken in and understood her orders.

‘I don’t need to tell you, proctor,’ she said, ‘that we are badly outnumbered out here. If they should turn, we are all dead.’

As Brankk went to his duties, Renski spared another glance back up at the wall. She could not be sure without using her lens, but Gethe looked nervous. Nerves in a commanding officer had a habit of transferring to the men. A hundred guns looked down upon the crowds, a hundred nervous fingers upon a hundred triggers.

As the loudhailers started up, Renski tried not to think about what could happen if one of those fingers grew too itchy. She summoned her squad. Nine able-bodied enforcers with a mixture of shields, mauls and combat shotguns followed her into the crowd. Fear and revulsion met them, a host of malnourished, dirty faces looking to assign blame for their woes. They parted only reluctantly.

Nade’s gunship still burned, lazy smoke drifting from the cracked hull. She’d head there first.

Though she wasn’t superstitious, she had overheard a phrase spoken by some of the citizenry over the last few weeks. It appeared to bring comfort in such beleaguered and uncertain times. Men and women had been sanctioned for its use, so she only muttered it beneath her breath.

‘The Emperor protects…’

TWENTY-NINE

Into the catacombs, the Palace beckoning

Zytos found him at the summit of the tower, head bowed, crouched on one knee. Smoke rose from armour still shimmering with heat.

Vulkan unclenched his fist, releasing a handful of ash that dispersed quickly in the air.

'They're gone, father,' said Zytos, his own war-plate scorched by the cleansing flame.

'What did you see?' Vulkan asked, his voice a rasp.

'I saw a figure, clad in gold,' said Abidemi, limping as he brought up the rear. 'As resplendent as the sun.'

Zytos nodded. He had reached for Vulkan as his father crushed the fulgurite and unleashed what power remained within. He had seen… *something*... within the firestorm before he'd had to close his eyes or be struck blind. Upon opening them again, the horde had vanished. Not fled, but gone. Erased.

Smote.

'I saw Numeon take a blade to the fulgurite. I saw it withstand all efforts to destroy it. Even the heart of Deathfire could not touch it, and yet you merely close your fist…'

Zytos dared Vulkan's gaze but received no answer to his question.

'They know we are here,' Vulkan said, rising and reclaiming his hammer, unsteady at first but growing stronger. 'And they will be hunting us. The Palace is close.' He gripped the talisman. 'I can feel it, the presence of my father. The Emperor is with us, my sons.'

'My lord, I do not trust this,' Zytos began.

Vulkan put a hand on his shoulder, father to son.

‘I cannot give you answers, Barek. I don’t have them. Ever since I returned, I have known a single truth. That I *must* reach Terra. The talisman is aligned to my fate somehow. I forged it for a purpose, one given to me by my father, one which I do not yet understand. I do not believe I could have fashioned the talisman had I not perished and been reborn, had I not been imbued with part of the Emperor’s will bound into that spearhead of stone. But we cannot linger. The fulgurite is gone. It has served its end at last, and given us a moment’s respite. We cannot squander it, my son.’

Zytos wanted answers. He had never possessed Numeon’s faith, or Abidemi’s spiritual belief, or even Gargo’s blunt acceptance. Vengeance had driven him, not belief. He had many questions.

In the end, he settled for just one.

‘Which way?’

They left the city, chased by an intangible hunger, the thing that had tasted Vulkan’s immortal soul when they had passed through the warp. They found a passageway and a great stone stair that led deeper, below the city.

Descending into a series of catacombs, the Drakes discovered further evidence of the Mechanicum’s presence in the eldritch tunnels. Strange, dormant machines littered every artery and conduit, their function unclear. The dead lingered here too, more of the Custodes and the Silent Sisterhood, entire cohorts of Mechanicum Thallax, Castellax and skitarii, and even the cold shells of Titans, the sight of their stricken bodies as impressive as it was appalling.

An urgency burned within Vulkan. It had seen them through the city, and to the labyrinth beneath. It had brought them to the very edge of where one world met another.

And it was here the Drakes came to a halt. Standing amongst the corpses of the fallen war machines, they saw an army.

Not of men or machines, but of monsters.

Of daemons.

A gateway loomed, far, far ahead like a distant horizon. A door to Terra, to the Palace itself. A sliver of light, just a crack, remained. A passage through the door, but it would not stay open for long.

A second army arrayed before the gate fell back in full retreat, holding off the horde and dying as they did it.

Titans and warriors clad in golden plate armour fought ferociously to stem the daemon tide. Great swathes of the dead had been left in their wake, their fallen

abandoned in the desire to survive, to fight on. Stragglers feasted on this carrion, small knots of daemons picking at the bones and sucking deep of the soul marrow.

Further on, in the midst of the battle, a Reaver fell, the great war machine smote to ruin by a winged beast wielding a blood-red axe. A second, smaller engine collapsed to one knee then fell forwards, harried by a swarm of capering, iridescent beasts. A phalanx of Martian automata reacted, their beam weapons emitting a collimated blaze of light and fury, until their bearers were overwhelmed by a flock of shrieking monstrosities and the beam flickered then died. Custodians and their ancient Contemptor brethren fought atop the wrecks of destroyed tanks, trying to hold back the wretched swarms amassing below. Golden jetbikes contested the unnatural skies with winged screamers and daemons riding strange, fleshy discs.

So distant was the fighting, discerning any further meaning was all but impossible.

Vulkan's eyes narrowed as he beheld the battle.

'That door leads to Terra. The Imperial Dungeon is beyond,' he said. 'My father awaits. He will hold the way open for us, but we must hurry.'

Hope was rekindled for a moment as Vulkan made to head off towards the gate and the battle, but then Zytos stepped into his path.

'You cannot mean to wade into that. To reach the gate you would have to pass through it. No man, no god, can withstand *that*.'

'There are no gods,' Vulkan warned.

'My lord, they are before us!'

Vulkan did not argue. His resolve remained unchanged, however.

'Gods or not, that *is* our path.'

'There has to be another way. Brothers…' said Zytos.

'It is certain death,' said Abidemi.

Even Gargo's belief faltered. 'Perhaps there is another path. Earlier, I saw a branching tunnel–'

'Enough!' said Vulkan, and then more softly. 'Enough.'

He shut his eyes and pressed his forehead against the head of *Urdrakule*.

'It is our path, but it is death. This cannot be the only way. It cannot end–'

Vulkan stopped and opened his eyes. Zytos met his gaze.

'I hear it too,' he said.

Some of the feasting daemons estranged from the battle had begun to turn. A few lapped at the air with their tongues. They scented prey, but they were still

too far away to be a threat.

The sound was not coming from them.

A low drone, just at the edge of hearing, filled the air. It gnawed at the senses, an irritant, growing louder and more insistent.

'The mist returns,' said Abidemi as a yellow fog began to gather. It rose quickly, climbing the tunnel walls, spreading until it shrouded the battle from sight and impeded the way ahead.

'That is no mist,' said Vulkan, and readied his hammer.

The droning resolved into the frenzied beating of hundreds of thousands of diaphanous wings, and a swarm of flies materialised around the Drakes, who clamped on their helms.

The fly cloud swirled, then coiled and uncoiled like the turning of a foetid screw, a noisome murmuration that barred the way back.

Caught between the yellow miasma ahead and the swarm behind, the Drakes were trapped in a stretch of tunnel barely fifty paces long. Even the walls closed, laden with a spontaneously growing fungus. Filth rapidly encrusted the fallen Titans. The bodies of dead Custodians swelled with sudden putrefaction, their skin undulating with the slow peristalsis of maggots.

The mist had lost its incorporeality and become a barrier of solid putrescence. Abidemi hacked at it with *Draukoros* but found it unyielding.

'That stench…' said Gargo.

'The hunger has found us,' Vulkan replied, his eyes on the swarm as it began to coalesce.

Slowly, through the blur of fat insect bodies, flesh began to materialise.

At first a gnarled finger, the yellow nail chipped and dirty. Then a flabby arm, skin hanging off it in folds like a grubby sail. Another arm followed, as wretched as the first. A torso, a gut, bloated and distended, girded by layers of fat. Pustules and boils protruded under the skin, ripe and fit to burst. Cloven feet, stumpy legs consumed under rolls of flesh. At last, a stubby head, its many chins framing a grinning mouth filled with needle teeth. A single milky eye blinked in childish amusement, the other gummed shut with seeping pus. A long, lascivious tongue slithered loose to lap at sagging, sore-encrusted breasts. A broken horn jutted from its forehead, crowned by a pair of rotten antlers.

Gargo retched within his helm, a spray of vomit painting the inside of his faceplate.

'Steady, brothers,' said Zytos, grimacing at the sheer foulness of the thing.

'Blood of Deathfire,' hissed Abidemi, fending off his own nausea. 'It is beyond

repellent.'

'Father… How do we kill this thing?' asked Zytos.

Scowling, Vulkan waited until that moment to put on his helm.

'You cannot help me here. All of you,' he said, striding towards the beast. 'Stay back.'

The yellow fog gathered in Vulkan's wake. Zytos tried to plough through it, but wisps of decaying matter entangled his legs. So mired, he could not follow. Instead, he had no choice but to retreat. In seconds, the miasma solidified as before and the Drakes found themselves encased in a cage of rot.

They were not alone for long.

The maggots had gored their way outside of their host bodies, and began to hatch.

'Gargo,' said Zytos, held rapt by the rapid metamorphosis, 'does that flamer still have fuel?'

Gargo hefted his spear, levelling the flamer he had attached to the blade at the corpses.

'It does, brother.'

'Then, by Vulkan, let them burn!'

The beast waddled with disgusting slowness, the last of the flies absorbed into the meat of its body or lazily snatched by its tongue. It chuckled as it regarded Vulkan.

And then it spoke.

'Take up thy black tongue and preach the words of rot.'

Its voice gurgled like a festering sinkhole, a bubbling clangour of corruption.

'Behold!' it said, stretching wide its flabby arms as if to encompass its own majesty. ***'Aghalbor, Bringer of Poxes.'***

'I see you, filth,' snarled Vulkan, and felt his gorge rise. 'This is *Urdrakule*, the *Burning Hand*. I'm going to use it to reach into your foul innards and immolate you.'

Aghalbor tittered, an utterly incongruous and abhorrent noise from such a beast.

'Let root and bower blight, to feed the plague of fortune.'

A crust of pestilence crept across Vulkan's armour, hardening across the joints. He felt it slowing him down, feeding atrophy into his bones, cancers into his muscles. He fell, leaning on the haft of his hammer to stay upright.

'Let bone succumb to canker, and flesh to waste,' cooed the daemon, chuckling as it reached for a bony hilt sticking out from one of its many folds of

greasy flesh.

'Seven times seven times seven, hark now! The tolling bell of the pox, the virulence of life unending, and disease unbound.'

Urdrakule burst into flame, scouring the filth scabbing Vulkan's armour, burning it away into flakes of ash. His strength returned, fuelled by an inner fire.

'Are we to fight, daemon, or must I endure more of this vapid poetry?'

Aghalbor's face contorted into an approximation of distaste.

'Spawn of the anathema, Aghalbor shall make a sport of it, if thou wish.' Wrapping chubby fingers around the hilt, the beast drew forth a great cankerous sword from its gut, the edge pitted and gleaming with corruption. ***'Quoth no more,'*** it uttered, its humour abruptly evaporated.

Vulkan barely leapt over the canker sword, the daemon much faster than its bulk would suggest. He swung *Urdrakule* but it was like hitting solid rock. Even the fire could find no purchase on the daemon's rubbery hide.

Aghalbor laughed as tendrils of ropy flesh speared from wounds that had opened in its flesh, coiling around the primarch's arms, pinning them to his sides. *Urdrakule* seared his armour and Vulkan had to douse its flame, his fingers scrabbling for the deactivation stud.

He felt a pull and braced his legs, but the daemon's strength was prodigious. Slowly, boots scraping against the ground, Vulkan was dragged towards it.

He gagged, spitting up a clot of black blood, and looked down to see the canker sword impaled in his chest. The daemon's laughter resounded in his ears as the blade slid free. The flesh tendrils uncoiled, allowing Vulkan to collapse to his knees. He let *Urdrakule* fall, then sank to all fours, coughing up thick yellow phlegm, a host to a riot of diseases.

He heard shrieking laughter and realised it came from the fat flies still buzzing around the daemon.

Vulkan felt his chin rise, lifted by Aghalbor's rancid tongue. Its breath seared the faceplate of his helm. A crack stitched the left retinal lens, and he wrenched the helm off in order to breathe.

Glaring at Vulkan through its milky eye, the daemon tutted as if reprimanding a wilful child. It slid the canker sword back into its sheath, the blade accepted greedily by its fatty excess.

Its tongue lengthened, entwining Vulkan's limp body. The primarch barely had strength enough to grab and hold on to his hammer, let alone swing it. Like him, it would soon be devoured by Aghalbor's widening maw, which slavered in anticipation.

'Such a morsel,' the daemon burbled, eyelid fluttering, skin trembling as it pushed Vulkan down into its gullet.

The fly swarm burned.

In their death throes they tried to bite and sting the Drakes, but legionary war-plate proved proof against them.

Zytos crushed the last beneath his boot in a spray of rank innards.

'What now?' asked Gargo, his armour smeared in greenish blood.

'Torch the bodies, brother. Every corpse that could be a host. Leave no scrap of this filth.'

'And what of the primarch?'

Zytos looked to Abidemi, who had sagged onto his haunches, but for all his relentless efforts the foetid barrier appeared unscathed.

Abidemi shook his head. 'It cannot be breached. Not by any means we possess.'

Zytos stared grimly at the barrier, willing it to reveal what was happening on the other side. Its opacity mocked him. He saw only shadows, suggestions of a struggle.

'Zytos…'

He turned at the sound of Gargo's voice and saw him gesture to the other barrier.

Shadows lurked here too, though much closer. Following the scent of prey, a horde had gathered.

Vulkan drowned in pestilence. He fought, but the flabby tongue pulled him in further. He tried to gasp a breath but a pudgy hand pushed him down and he swallowed filth. Digestive acids ate at his armour.

He descended and all sense of reality faded as he sank ever deeper. Foulness without end existed beyond the daemon's gullet. It was a gateway to another realm, a great and foetid garden into which Vulkan was slowly being consumed.

Urdrakule had slid from his grasp, but he refused to yield.

His fingers brushed against the talisman of seven hammers. It felt warm to the touch and for the briefest moment, his mind filled with the vision of endless fire. He blinked and stood before a world aflame, its cities and monuments mere shadows in the flickering haze, before he too burned…

Except he wasn't burning, he was drowning. But something remained of the fire. He felt it stir within *Urdrakule*. The heat of its awakened power reached him through a mire of wretched innards.

He should be dead, but for his father's gift. Clawing through the foulness, the rumblings of Aghalbor's tortured gut thunderous in his ears, Vulkan found the activation stud upon the weapon's haft and lit the hammer.

Fire blazed into being, purifying, rampant. Hotter than before. A furnace.

The daemon recoiled, its throat clenching, corruptive acid rushing upwards. Its stomach lurched. Hefting *Urdrakule* one-handed, both blind and deaf, Vulkan seized Aghalbor's tongue with his other hand. It dangled cruelly, a rancid lifeline. Gauntleted fingers dug into rubbery flesh and pulled.

A panicked choke escaped the daemon's lips. Its mouth opened as it tried desperately to swallow.

Vulkan took a breath, and thrust with his hammer. Aghalbor squealed in pain, several needle teeth cracked by the blow. It retched, releasing a flood of corruption and the bedraggled body of a primarch.

Staggering to his feet, his armour seared but intact, Vulkan yanked on the daemon's tongue and tore it out.

Ignoring its gurgled protests, he charged at Aghalbor and fed his fury into *Urdrakule*.

Hurt, but not defeated, the daemon unsheathed its canker sword.

Vulkan shattered it. He smashed in Aghalbor's milky eye and broke off an antler. The talisman grew warm against his chest, and Vulkan yoked its strength. He struck again, and again. And with every blow that followed, the daemon shrank, wheezing like a slowly deflating bladder until nothing but pieces of decaying flesh remained.

The flesh began to discorporate, withering against *Urdrakule*'s cleansing fire, unable to turn back into the swarm.

Not even ash was left by the end.

The daemon was dead. Not banished, but annihilated. The talisman had done that, Vulkan was certain. As he had killed it, he beheld the endless flame again but in snatched flashes. Exhausted, its meaning eluded him for now.

Vulkan wanted to fall. He badly needed rest. Instead he turned.

The barrier of putrescence dissolved, the last of Aghalbor's power turned to mist and then to nothing.

Vulkan's sons had their backs to him. They faced a horde of red-skinned daemons, revealed by the second barrier's collapse. The Drakes were sorely outnumbered.

Something called to Vulkan, begging to be unleashed.

He felt the fire. He clutched the talisman.

Not a compass, never that. Something else. Something my father gave me, something he forged with my hand…

Vulkan had forged it, but he did not yet know how to wield it, or even *if* he should wield it. What would he wreak if he did? He had to act. He was weakened. The daemons would slay them.

A ferocious arc of lightning fell amongst the creatures. It coursed like wildfire, turning the red-skinned daemons into blackened husks. The storm abated and from its wrath stepped a seer.

'Deathfire,' uttered Vulkan, causing his sons to turn.

'Father, you live!' said Gargo.

Vulkan nodded, but looked beyond his sons.

'You have returned,' he said.

The Drakes turned back to regard the stranger in their midst, who gave a shallow bow. The old man of the mountain had come amongst them, the truth of his provenance laid bare.

An eldar, judging by his garb. One Vulkan had met before, judging by his eyes. The seer wore black robes under runic armour. A strange helm masked his features and he clutched an ornate, alien staff that resonated power.

Behind the seer, the battle raged on. The Emperor's army had almost retreated in its entirety now but the gap in the door remained.

'You cannot go that way, Lord of Drakes,' said the seer. 'I can show you another.'

Vulkan staggered up to the seer, waving away offers of help from his sons.

'What is your stake in all of this? Why go to such lengths to get me to Terra?'

The seer canted his head. With the eldar's face hidden by the elaborate helm, Vulkan could only guess at the creature's mood.

'I have done much more, I assure you,' he said. 'To reach you here at this moment, this crucial skein… I have done terrible things.'

'You have not answered my question, seer.'

'Such arrogance, even from you. Must there always be an answer? Have you not seen enough already to understand. You do not die here.' He gestured to the Drakes. '*They* do not die here… if… *if* you can reach beyond the ignorance of your species and accept that there are forces in the universe which even mankind cannot hope to understand or master.'

'Your reasons, seer,' said Vulkan. 'I must know, and judge the truth of it for myself. Remove your helm so I might see your face.'

'There is little time for it. I have seen what happens next if you refuse…' He

sighed with centuries-long resignation, but reached up and slowly took off his helm.

Far from duplicitous or self-assured, the eldar looked weary and old for one of his immortal kind.

'My concerns are not so different from yours,' he said, his voice different without the filter of his mask, more tired and not nearly so aloof. 'I was part of a plan. I believed it to be right. I was wrong. I wrote another plan from fate.'

'We cannot trust this creature,' said Gargo.

'What other choice do we have?' answered Zytos.

The seer turned his inscrutable gaze upon Zytos.

'None, son of Themis. And yet here I am trusting you, putting all of my hope in mankind.' He looked back to Vulkan. 'It was not meant to be your path. It was your brother's, the one you called Gorgon, if that brings any comfort. I witnessed his death, every skein led to it. No act you could have taken would have prevented it. He rejected the path. I was wrong then too. But what you do next will determine if your brother's sacrifice was in vain. Do not submit to the laughter of thirsting gods, Vulkan. It is the cry of the lost and the damned.'

Vulkan looked to the hordes, at the daemons now hurrying for his blood and soul, at the ones still fighting at the gate. The last of the defending army had all but stepped through, but the way yet remained open. It could stay that way for an age and still Vulkan would not get through the legions in his path.

'What must I do?' he asked.

The seer stepped back to carve a circular rune into the ground with his staff. After a muttered incantation, the rune began to glow, as if a bright light burned through its cracks, and then it suddenly fell away and took the ground with it.

A maelstrom of light swirled within, a writhing tempest wracked by lightning.

'This is the last time our paths will cross,' said the seer. 'I have done all I can for mankind.'

He sounded sad.

'The path will close as soon as you pass through it. Do not wait.'

The seer vanished, swept up by the same storm that had presaged his arrival.

Vulkan was left alone with his sons. The talisman still felt warm to the touch, but he chose to say nothing, for what could he say that made any sense?

'To have come this far and fought this hard, to be within sight of Terra itself…' said Gargo, his gaze on the way ahead to the daemon horde.

'Thwarted, and cast unto an uncertain fate,' said Abidemi.

'Our path has ever been uncertain,' said Zytos. 'And we have walked it

regardless. Fate brought us here, but our brotherhood is what has kept us alive. I trust in that now, as I have always.'

A great sorrow fell upon Vulkan's face then, tempered by pride and admiration for his sons.

Staring down into the maelstrom, he felt a hand upon his shoulder.

'Where you go, we follow,' said Zytos. 'Wherever it leads us.'

Together, they stepped into the storm.

THIRTY

His dark cults, arising

As a girl, Renski had grown up on an agri farm on a border world within the Sol System. A decent way of life, better than most. Her father had raised steers – fine, well-nourished bovids destined for the bellies of the Emperor's crusading armies. He took pride in his stock, and fed and cared for them well. He loved his daughter too, especially since his wife had died of lung pox and left the two of them alone. Barely an adolescent, Renski had tended the herd, lending a hand after her mother could not.

She had been in the grazing pens when a slythig had found a way through the refraction field. It feasted well on the good meat, raising a panic in the bovids. Renski recognised the stampede for what it was too late. She became trapped in the pens, unable to escape. Her only hope was to wade into the herd and find the slythig, choking on animal sweat and her own terror of being crushed or stung. She killed it, of course, an electro-pike to its chitinous thorax, but her aspirations to be an agri farmer ended that day. The memory of it never left her, though.

It returned now with interest, Renski wading through the herd again, looking for a slythig.

She eyed the faces of the crowd with wary suspicion, glad she did so through her visor. That way they wouldn't see her fear.

'One stab to the thorax and it's over,' she muttered.

'Proctor?'

'Nothing,' said Renski.

The wreck of Nade's Valkyrie was ahead. It had crashed a few hundred paces from the wall. The pilot had managed to bring it down on its belly. Renski considered whether the intention of the saboteurs had actually been to hit the

wall.

People scattered as the intercession squad approached, too timid to keep up their looting and shouting in the face of shock mauls and combat shotguns. They didn't go far, however, lurking at the periphery of the wrecked gunship, hungry and fearful. Only at a distance did the belligerence continue.

The Valkyrie's two door gunners were gone, flung loose during the crash, or taken. Renski hoped it wasn't the latter and eyed the crowd with fresh disdain. A rash of indistinguishable, dirty faces looked back at her.

'They hate us,' said one of the squad, wisely using the vox to express his concerns.

'They're just afraid, Lenix,' Renski replied openly.

The gunship's hold had been stripped almost bare. Only what was bolted to the hull remained and even that showed evidence of attempted removal by force. Mercifully, the two heavy bolters mounted to the side doors remained intact.

Upon entering the gloomy hold, where smoke still hung in the air, Renski instantly noticed the medi-pack, tool kit and emergency rations were gone. So too a barrel of steel cable, its concomitant hand winch and an entire lockbox of photon flares. All were standard issue. She checked the armoury. The wall-mounted case had been severely tampered with but not breached. She allowed herself a small sigh of relief. 'At least they didn't get any weapons or ammunition,' remarked Lenix.

'They shot a Valk from the sky, Lenix. With a rocket tube. At least they didn't get any *more* weapons.'

'Who are they, proctor?' asked Heg, an old veteran who had served the Lex most of his adult life. Renski trusted his instincts.

'You tell me, Heg,' she said, the three of them carefully working their way through the troop hold to the cockpit. The rest of the squad had formed a perimeter outside. They were disciplined enough not to chatter, and stayed vigilant.

'Not opportunists, I'd say,' answered Heg. 'Takes planning to do something like this. Training too. And the weapons? Not easy to take out a gunship like that. Need to know where to hit for a start. That takes precision.' He had looked down at the damage to the gunship, rubbing his salt-and-pepper stubble, but now turned his gaze back to Renski. 'You served with the Reeves, didn't you, proctor?'

Renski nodded.

'Then you'll have seen what they've been chasing. The rumours.'

She had – the cults, the ritual murders. Renski didn't like to think of them as sacrifices. The fear was bad enough without fuelling it with superstition and stories about monsters.

'What was it they heard?' she asked.

'Something about his dark cults, arising.'

'I heard a name too,' said Lenix. 'Heard it a lot recently. "Lupercal".'

Lupercal. The name of Horus.

Lenix looked pale in the low light of the stab lumens. Renski had to admit even she felt colder, though she couldn't attribute it to anything as mundane as the dropping temperature. Night was coming, and in more ways than the literal sense.

'Let's get moving, shall we,' she said, and headed for the cockpit.

The door had been breached, and Renski felt a sick sensation in her stomach as she considered that Nade and his navigator, Uli, might have been taken. She gave a sigh of relief when she saw them still strapped in to their flight seats. Even from behind, as she forced her way into the shattered cockpit, she could tell they were both dead.

It wasn't until she made it around to the front that she saw being taken by the mob would have been mercy.

Nade and Uli had been cut. Not from the glacis at the front of the gunship – that had weathered the impact, cracked but holding. Someone had come in with a knife and cut them. It hadn't been to kill them; the blood was so minimal they must have died on impact. Nade had a head wound. Uli had been impaled by a piece of fuselage bent in from the crumpled nose cone. Symbols had been carved into their bodies. She had seen one of them before, a wheel with eight points. Something felt wrong about the air, it was too heavy and thick, as if the gravity had suddenly increased.

Lenix scurried from the cockpit. Bending double, he vomited in the troop hold.

Even Heg was breathing hard, unable to take his eyes off Nade's mutilated body.

'If they did this…' he mumbled.

'It means the perpetrators are close and any number of people in that crowd outside could have seen them.'

Renski raised the other proctors on the vox. Situation reports filtered in slowly. No meaningful progress. A few dangerous stills had been shut down, obscura peddlers rousted and shackled. Tents kicked in. No sign of a rocket tube, no sign of any insurgents, the so-called 'dark cults'.

‘Can you feel it, Heg?’ said Renski, getting them both out of the cockpit.

‘Proctor?’

‘This place, it’s about to explode.’

The dry earth trembled, unnoticed by the crowds. They were too intent on the enforcers in their midst, or the trades they were making, or the hooded figures who moved amongst them. In sight of the wall but hidden by the masses, something stirred beneath the wastes.

Once they were back outside the crashed gunship, Renski got in touch with Gethe.

‘Warden-primus, we found something at the crash site.’

As she talked, Renski surveyed the immediate crowd. One woman caught her eye, stern-faced, cold. Something about her didn’t feel right, and Renski had learned long ago to trust such instincts. From her time in the Reeves, she had learned something of human behaviour, of the pathological desire in some perpetrators to linger by the scenes of their crimes, driven by a sadistic urge to see the aftermath.

She motioned to Lenix to investigate.

‘*Have you apprehended the bombers, Proctor Renski?*’

Gethe sounded nervous, and Renski craned her neck to try to get a look at him on the wall, but couldn’t find him. She saw the guns well enough, aimed at the crowd, at her and her men.

‘Not yet, warden-primus.’

‘*Then get to it, Renski. The wall isn’t safe until you’ve rooted out these saboteurs.*’

Renski bit her tongue, deciding against telling her superior how ridiculous and paranoid his request actually was. They had drawn what evidence they could from the wreck, some of it extremely disturbing. That would have to suffice for now.

She told Gethe what they had found, and the warden-primus fell silent for a long moment.

‘Warden-primus?’ she asked after deeming the pause long enough.

‘*I don’t like this, proctor. I’m recalling you and your men. Expect immediate extraction.*’

‘Sir, we’ve only been out here a short time. A larger sweep might reveal–’

‘*I’ve made my decision, proctor. Prepare your squads. You’re coming back to the wall.*’

Lenix had reached the woman Renski had identified and started questioning her. Another man had come to remonstrate with him, the woman's husband perhaps or simply an agitated onlooker.

'Yes, warden-primus,' said Renski, wondering whether Gethe was concerned about her wellbeing or if he actually just wanted more troops on the wall.

She was about to go over to Lenix when she felt a gentle tug on her arm and looked down to see a little boy, no older than six she guessed.

Renski waved away two of her squad who had been about to intercede, and crouched down to the boy's eye level.

'Are you lost, child? Is she your mother?'

She gestured to the woman. An argument had developed, drawing in three other enforcers. Heg was nearby, already on the vox, calling it in with the other squads in case they needed reinforcement.

Renski was rising again, keen to quell any disquiet and avoid anything worse than an altercation, when the boy grabbed at her wrist.

She glanced down, her attention still half on the increasingly volatile exchange between Lenix and the woman. Other parties had begun to get involved. She needed to shut this down fast. The boy blinked, his face as cold and pale as alabaster, and the same disquiet she had felt in the Valkyrie came back.

'Lupercal,' he said, in a way no child should be able to.

Renski frowned, fear clenching her gut as if she were back in the grazing pen with the slythig. 'What?'

The woman stopped arguing. She just stopped.

'Lupercal,' she said.

Then another, just a voice, hidden amongst the crowd.

'Lupercal.'

A vendor set down the vermin he had been roasting on a spit.

'Lupercal.'

A scavenger, sifting through his loot, let the sack slip from his grasp and his 'treasure' tumble free.

'Lupercal.'

A hooded figure emerged from the ground. Several hooded figures. They were armed.

'Gun!' shouted Renski, and then the shooting started.

From the wall, Gethe saw the muzzle flashes, angry starbursts made brighter by the onset of night.

Fear had him. Of the unknown, of the night. Of Horus. He heard them chanting the Warmaster's name, his followers. On Terra. Here at Plaintive's Reach.

He didn't even try to reach Renski on the vox. He just gave the order to open fire.

Renski tried to keep her head as she fired her sidearm. She had lost sight of the boy. He'd let her go as soon as the gun battle began.

Lenix was dead, shot through the throat at close range. Heg had a leg wound, but had managed to limp into the cover of an upturned vendor's cart. Solid slugs ricocheted off the crude metal sidings. Two other enforcers were screaming as the crowd overwhelmed and crushed them. She tried but couldn't reach Brankk or any of the other proctors.

'To the wall! To the wall!' she cried, knowing the sentries on the battlements would start shooting soon. She got off a shot with her sidearm. In the darkness, she thought she saw one of the hooded gunmen go down. Cultists, she realised. A few had shed their cloaks, revealing the sigil she had seen on Nade and Uli carved into their own flesh. It was sickening.

Someone stepped in Renski's way. A large man. He had a piece of metal pipe in his hand and looked as if he wanted to knock her teeth out with it.

Cultist or not, she felled him with a single blow of her shock maul and didn't wait to see the man jerk in nerve-shredding agony.

'Move, move!' she urged her men. The other intercession squads were coming in too.

'We need immediate support and extraction,' Renski shouted down the vox. 'Get the Valks in the air and open up the damn gate!'

Sporadic gunfire lit up the shadows, and threw scared and angry faces into sharp relief. The crowd panicked and they swept towards the wall. Renski and about thirty enforcers were just ahead of them. The rest fought running battles through the makeshift streets of the shanty town that had risen up outside Plaintive's Reach.

Las-fire stabbed down from above like hot, deadly rain. In the distance, a man's head broke apart as the sniper towers went to work.

A rocket tube fizzed out of the darkness on the wasteland side of the wall. One of the watchtowers exploded. Rubble and several bodies fell forwards from the wall to the screams of the onlookers caught in the middle.

'Gethe! What are you doing? Gethe!' Renski screamed down the vox, frantically urging on the remaining enforcers. They had to get to the wall. Gethe

had to open the gate or they'd be dead. No room for the Valkyries now.

One hove in anyway, coming up over the wall like a bird of prey. Its side doors rolled open and two heavy bolters started up. The firing was indiscriminate. Bodies were churned to red mist. Mostly cultists, who had amassed in force, but not all.

'Bloody Throne, Gethe! Cease fire, damn it!'

Gethe must have lost all capacity to think, to reason. All that remained was fear and the instinctive reaction to it. Fight or flight. It seemed Gethe had chosen the former.

Renski took a glancing hit to the shoulder and cried out. She stumbled, but found Heg beneath her and the two struggled on together, their enforcer brethren around them.

Maybe eighty men were left out of over two hundred that Renski could see. She led them to the wall. They were perhaps fifty paces out, Renski screaming at Gethe to open the gate and let them in when the Valkyrie came down. She didn't see what disabled it. It looked like a haywire grenade, judging by the caul of electrical interference wreathing the hull.

The gunship came down hard, nosediving right into the wall. It was maybe ten metres away from Renski when it hit. An explosion followed, then another, but not from a rocket tube detonation. In the sudden flare of light, Renski saw the wall tremble. One of the outer armour plates that ran between each buttress buckled and split. Its absence revealed a crack.

Gethe lost his footing as the wall shook and he struck his head against the battlement.

Groggily, he heard Renski's impassioned pleas across the vox for the first time. Blood leaked down his face. He tried to stand but the wall shuddered. He thought it was the head wound and then he noticed the men on his section were unsteady too. Something was happening.

He heard the break in the wall as much as he felt it.

Then he saw disaster unfolding, and the poor souls about to be caught up in it.

'Renski…'

Skidding to a halt, Renski watched as a huge piece of the border wall sheared off and fell towards her. She held tight to Heg's hand, knowing there was no escape. Photon flares lit the night, released by her comrades in desperation. A false sunrise flickered, ephemeral and actinic, before the shadow of the wall swallowed it. No rescue would come for them. Their rescuers were on the wall,

and falling with it. Gethe was falling with it.

'Throne of Terra,' Renski murmured, wishing for a god to pray to.

Behind her, she heard an eruption of earth as if something huge had just clawed its way out of the grave. She would have turned, but the wall was all she could see, falling inexorably, those caught in its shadow screaming.

Heg had closed his eyes, teeth clenched against the inevitable outcome.

Renski forced hers open, so she saw something of the giant that rushed to interpose itself between the proctor and death by pulverisation.

What she saw next defied understanding. She thought the wall had stopped in midair, held by some force field. Then she saw the giant underneath it and realised he had caught it. He wielded a colossal hammer and had braced the wall against its shaft.

The primarchs were known to Renski. Every citizen on Terra had seen their statues or heard of their legends. She had never borne witness to one in the flesh, especially up close. Even the Imperial Fists, merely the scions of such a being, were rarely seen outside the Palace confines.

The primarch in their midst looked immense. His scalloped armour had seen war, she could tell even in the darkness, and his skin shone like polished onyx. His eyes glared fiery red with the effort of his feat. For the briefest moment they met with Renski's and she felt a strange empathy with this god-like figure.

He bore a huge slab of the wall. Alone.

Then she saw the cultists who had also fallen in the wall's shadow begin to gather their wits. They picked up blades and guns, intent on the primarch, some atavistic urge overcoming their awe of him.

'Lupercal!' one of them roared, a woman who looked like a medicae.

Renski reacted on instinct. Questions could wait. Realisation of what was actually happening could wait. If she survived. 'Protect him!' she shouted.

Heg and the other enforcers were on their feet, reaching for combat shotguns and shock mauls. Whatever they had left.

They need not have bothered.

Three legionaries came out of the darkness to cut the cultists down. More than twenty fell in seconds, dispatched with grim lethality. A stub pistol went off, but the bullet ricocheted off battle-worn war-plate. The legionaries moved through the rebel throng with a ferocity of purpose that Renski found at once terrifying and invigorating. Fifty, sixty cultists died before the rest broke. They scattered, harried by enforcers who had watched it all unfold.

It was all over in seconds, the rest of the cultists either put to flight or left to be

rounded up later by what remained of the intercession squads.

Renski stared, awed and afraid, until one of the legionaries approached her. He was also massive, though not as large as his primarch, his armour of a draconic design. A cloak of scales that glistened in the light of stab lumens was draped across his shoulders. It looked ragged but sturdy. Savagery bled off him. Even his war-helm snarled. He carried a large hammer in one hand, energy crackling about its head. Perhaps seeing the fear in her eyes, he reached up and removed his helm. A face as black as soot greeted her, those same embers burning in his eyes as his primarch. A Salamander, Renski realised. She had been taught never to take off her helm in an active warzone but was not about to gainsay the warrior.

'You there,' he said, clamping his fearsome helmet to his belt, where it attached firmly, magnetically. The eyes blazed, but were not without compassion. She had never known Space Marines could feel such emotions. 'Get these people clear. My brothers and I will deal with the vermin.' And then he was gone again, replacing his helm and wading off into the shadows.

Renski didn't hesitate further.

She and the men she had managed to gather together drove back the crowds, using the loudhailers to get their attention. She tried not to think about the wall, waiting to descend and crush her, or the goliath who held it upon his shoulders like some figure of myth. Those who saw him were aghast, but they realised the danger too and fell back.

With the cultists dead or fleeing, some semblance of order returned, helped in part by the enforcers already amongst the crowds and beginning to marshal them in the absence of the immediate crisis.

As soon as the masses were clear, Renski gave a signal across the loudhailer.

The primarch, his face strained, fed a burst of power into his hammer and the wall shattered around him. Again, Renski found herself agog to witness such magnificent technology. And there he stood, surrounded by debris, weary but still strong enough to favour Renski with an appreciative nod.

'Vulkan,' she whispered, able to remember the primarch's name now the threat of imminent death had passed. She managed to nod back, but that was all.

His sons went to him at once, and she saw the mythic warriors and their father exchange words in a strange dialect. Renski found it odd to witness their obvious closeness. She had never seen Space Marines like this before, almost at rest. At peace. Their easy familiarity spoke of many shared experiences. That and their battered armour suggested they had been on a long journey. It had somehow

brought them to the old earth of Terra.

Then she remembered the crowd. They had been awestruck by the god-like figure in their midst, but now that awe was fading they began to clamour for the wall again. A ragged breach yawned in the barrier between the wastes and the outer precincts of Plaintive's Reach. From there another wall and then the Petitioner's City. Urgency seized the masses, fuelled by fear and a potent survival instinct.

Vulkan's sons surrounded him, but the crowd just flowed around them.

Even with a primarch and three of his legionaries at her side, Renski and her enforcers could not hope to stem the tide. The wall would be overrun. She saw several of her comrades entangled in the fallen debris. One of the bodies was Gethe's and she felt a great swell of pity that this should be his end after so many long years of service.

Her immediate concerns arrested her attention. She turned back towards the crowds, drawing her shock maul as the stampede began, determined to try to slow the horde.

'Halt!' she cried, her vox slaved to the loudhailers, her voice booming across Plaintive's Reach. 'Cease, and come to order!'

The crowd stopped, and Renski had to check herself.

'I really didn't think that would work,' she muttered, baffled.

A deeply resonant voice answered. 'As powerful as your oratory is,' declared Vulkan, gesturing towards the breach, 'I think *they* are reason for the waning tide.'

Renski turned and beheld a phalanx of shimmering golden-yellow standing in front of the breach.

They had come at last. Not in answer to Gethe's summons. They had come for *him*.

The Imperial Fists.

Zytos bristled when he saw Dorn's own.

'Why do they aim their weapons at us?' asked Gargo.

'It's not us, brother,' Zytos replied, but refrained from responding in kind. Nothing would be gained here from rashness.

His gaze on the wall of breacher shields suddenly before him, Vulkan stepped out from amongst the Drakes. 'Be calm, my sons. We are not expected or wanted, and come at a dark hour.'

'All the more reason to rejoice at your return, my lord,' said Gargo.

‘They do not believe it is him,’ said Abidemi.

Vulkan did not answer. Instead, he approached the Imperial Fists’ leader. A black skull adorned the warrior’s breastplate, laurel-wreathed in emerald. Silver lightning crossed his shoulder guards beneath a clenched fist of jet, and a black cloak trimmed with ice lion fur hung at his back. A Huscarl, one of Dorn’s fiercest protectors. His red retinal lenses glinted as they regarded the Lord of Drakes.

The crowd fell to silence, the sight of forty bolters wielded by Dorn’s own praetorians enough to quell any riotous urges.

‘Do you speak for Dorn, and for these men?’ Vulkan asked of the warrior.

He was the only legionary in golden-yellow not to have raised his weapon. He had a hand on the hilt of a ceremonial seax blade sheathed at his hip, the other within quick reach of a bolt pistol on the opposite side.

Vulkan did not have the heart or pride to tell him that however fast he was able to draw them, it would still have been too slow. His brothers, on the other hand…

Vulkan did not doubt his ability to survive forty bolter salvoes, but he could not say the same for his sons.

‘Answer me, legionary. I know my brother would have instilled respect in you. Or do you believe me a dead man, an apparition or a false face?’

‘I do not know what to believe,’ the warrior answered at last, gruff in the manner traditional of the VII. Dorn’s sons were as rigid and inflexible as the walls they stood sentry on. Vulkan applauded their dependability, where others might disparage it as lacking in imagination.

‘Have you not heard?’ said the primarch, his smile genuine but hinting at the pain of regret. ‘Vulkan lives.’

The warrior did not respond. He maintained his watch, as did his men. Every one of them had his weapon trained on Vulkan, no thought spared for the crowd. They posed no threat, of course. None would dare approach the league of golden-yellow surrounding the breach.

‘I have a great desire to speak to your father,’ Vulkan told him. ‘I assume he sent you. I imagine he is watching even now. Rogal will know. He will see me and he will know. We are kin. So, while we wait for my brother, perhaps you would remove your helm and we can at least meet eye to eye as warriors. And I would have your name, unless I am to address you as legionary?’

A moment’s pause suggested reluctance on the warrior’s part, but he spoke eventually.

‘I am Archamus.’

Vulkan smiled, though his eyes were suddenly intent on the legionary.

‘Then let us greet each other as sword brothers, for we fought together during the Great Crusade.’

The warrior who had identified himself as Archamus reached up and removed his helm with a hiss of pneumatic locks disengaging from their seals. A young but proud warrior regarded Vulkan. Despite his youth he had begun to bear the lines in his face that spoke of eternal vigilance.

Vulkan frowned.

‘You are not he,’ he said. ‘You are not Archamus.’

The warrior took on a solemn expression. ‘I bear his name, in both honour and memoriam.’

At this Vulkan nodded, understanding.

‘Then I grieve for his passing, as I do all noble sons and brothers fallen in this war.’

Archamus did not respond immediately, though the hardness of his eyes suggested agreement.

He said, ‘If you *are* the Lord of Drakes, how did you survive? How did you reach Terra?’

‘There is a long answer to that question, but I shall simply say it was by my father’s will and the courage of my sons.’

Archamus looked like he was about to say more when he received a message in the vox-bead in his ear.

He listened, and Vulkan waited, though the message was terse as Archamus turned a moment later to his men and gave a signal.

‘Only you, my lord,’ said Archamus, and put his helmet back on.

Zytos was about to protest but Vulkan calmed him with a gesture as he rejoined his sons for a brief moment.

‘I do not like this, father,’ said Zytos, a wary eye on the Imperial Fists, who moved in perfect lockstep, the parting of their ranks like a drawbridge revealing a safe passage into an unknown keep.

‘Nor I,’ said Abidemi. ‘We have come this far together.’

Vulkan put his hands on the shoulder of both his sons, and nodded to Gargo. What the primarch said next was meant for all of them.

‘You have served beyond duty. You brought me back from the dead. There is no greater honour you could have shown me and I shall be forever indebted to you, my Draaksward. My sons. But I must go the rest of the way alone. Stay here.’ He

gestured to a female enforcer who watched enrapt and the great swathe of humanity that had been her charge. ‘Vouchsafe these people. Lend them your courage. Lead them with your example. They have had enough of fear. Inspire them, as you have inspired me.’

The three bowed as one, each sinking to a knee. Tears streamed freely down Gargo’s face, prompting a fierce salute from Zytos.

‘You have our oath, primarch.’

Vulkan did not look back. He heard Abidemi singing, a lament of old Nocturne but one that spoke of glory and honour undying. Vulkan smiled sadly as he made for the breach, a phalanx of golden-yellow closing up behind him to seal the way, and a Huscarl with the name of Archamus watching him go as he listened to the voice in his ear.

A female voice came through the vox-bead in his ear. ‘*Is it him?*’

‘Dorn will know,’ Archamus replied, standing with his warriors as he watched Vulkan depart alone.

‘*But is it him? What is your assessment?*’

‘Dorn will adjudge that.’

‘*Indeed, but is… it… him?*’

Archamus sighed, but chose to relent.

‘It feels… right.’

‘*Instinct alone should not be trusted, you know that.*’

‘Sometimes that is all we have to avail ourselves of.’

There was a pause as the person on the end of the vox-feed considered the import of that statement.

‘*And the others? Is it them?*’

‘It could be.’

‘*It is as I said. We cannot assume all of the assets were activated.*’

‘No, Andromeda,’ said Archamus, his eyes turning to the crowds waiting beyond the breach, ‘we cannot.’

THIRTY-ONE

Two brothers, reunited

Vulkan passed beyond the broken gates and left Plaintive's Reach behind. He then crossed another gate, an auspex array scanning his every molecule but unable to define what they saw, as eagle-masked sentinels looked on with cold dispassion. Sentry lights strafed him, a statue in saurian armour.

These too Vulkan left behind, the way made open to him amidst the crashing refrain of disengaging locking bolts and gear-driven barriers parting. The second gate led to a commercial district at the edges of the Petitioner's City, which had been summarily evacuated. The resource alone to achieve such a feat and the apparent need to do so told Vulkan all he needed to know about how seriously Dorn was taking his sudden appearance.

And yet after he passed through the ghost-like streets and avenues, he was to be given a further lesson.

Upon reaching a third gate, much taller than the others and surprisingly ornate, Vulkan realised he was not merely being allowed ingress, he was being shepherded.

The gate opened much like the others, the grand rendering of a mythic *gryphonne* splitting down the middle, its wings parting east and west. Behind it stood a formidable guardian.

The Knight soared above Vulkan, who had to crane his neck to meet the ironclad gaze of its visor slit. Frosty azure light burned within. A great chainblade was mounted on one arm, currently dormant. The other had a thermal cannon, cold for the moment. It would not take much for either weapon system to activate. Its armour fumed with mild radiation fog and heat-bleed. The reactors of the great war engine hummed, but it did not move, and nor did its

vox-horns stir. Vulkan felt its regard upon him, but for now it was content to watch, to wait.

Vulkan gave it no cause to anger, and did not engage with it in any way. He considered what must have happened on Terra to provoke such caution. Back at the wall, the Imperial Fists had seemed on edge. He had never known the sons of Dorn to be anything but stolid.

As he passed beyond the threshold of the gate and its guardian, Vulkan found himself in a great square, empty but for the armoured warrior waiting for him there. Wintry light from a pair of enfilading watchtower lamps bled the figure almost to monochrome.

Gold armour turned to white, its ornamentation made glorious, almost deific. An eagle head, rendered in profile, sat proudly upon each shoulder. The warrior's gauntleted hands rested on the pommel of a great chainsword, its red casing made pale in the harsh light and chased with shimmering filigree, the blade pointed downwards. A crack in the stone flags underfoot webbed from where the weapon touched the ground.

Though bareheaded, he did not squint in the pellucid aura that surrounded him. But as his dark eyes fell upon Vulkan, they narrowed. A hard face framed those chips of napped flint. White hair, so fair and fine it looked like fire, crowned his head.

'You come at a most inauspicious time,' said Dorn, his voice harsh and thunderous where Vulkan's was deep and resonant.

Vulkan crossed the hundred paces separating him from his brother.

Though he could not see them, he felt the many pairs of eyes upon him, watching from somewhere in the shadowy arcade that delineated the square.

Upon reaching Dorn, he smiled warmly.

'It is good to see you, Rogal.'

Dorn nodded, ever reserved. He sheathed his sword and at this signal from their primarch, Vulkan heard the sound of twenty Imperial Fists disengaging and powering down their weapons.

'You look older, brother,' said Vulkan.

'And you are no different from the day we met,' Dorn answered coolly. 'I heard you had died.' His annoyance at being called away from his numerous duties and responsibilities faded, though Vulkan could see the burden still weighed heavily.

'I have longed to see my brothers again… The ones not trying to kill me.'

Dorn's jaw stiffened at the remark, suggesting some unspoken pain or regret. Vulkan did not press him. Some truths were best left unsaid.

‘I would embrace you,’ Vulkan confessed, ‘but that was never your way, was it, Rogal?’

Dorn laughed gruffly. ‘Abstention is a wise decision.’

Vulkan embraced him firmly anyway and felt his affection for his brother returned, albeit awkwardly.

As they parted, the smile did not quite reach Dorn’s eyes, though the expression was not unkind. ‘I am glad you live. Of late, I have found precious little to celebrate.’

‘I can see that, brother,’ said Vulkan, gesturing to their surroundings. ‘The Palace is much changed.’

‘We all are,’ said Dorn. ‘Everything has changed. It had to.’

Above, Vulkan heard the engine drone of an approaching ship. The silhouette of a transport appeared in the distance.

‘Is that for us?’

‘For you, but I will accompany you some of the way.’

‘I must see father. I must reach the Throne,’ said Vulkan, his eyes drifting from the gunship back to Dorn.

‘I know,’ said Dorn. ‘We knew of your coming. The Emperor told us. He also said you were to be escorted to the Imperial Dungeon.’

‘And yet I am greeted with bolter and blade by one of your Huscarls.’

Dorn allowed a wry smile to reach his face. ‘Archamus has much to learn. I am also being cautious.’

‘I was sorry to hear of his forebear’s passing.’

The levity drained from the other primarch.

‘He gave his life for mine. Kestros wears his mantle well and proudly. He did his duty.’

‘I am only glad he did not kill me where I stood,’ said Vulkan.

Dorn’s eyebrow raised a fraction. ‘I suspect that would be difficult, even for a hundred of my sons.’

After a moment’s pause, Vulkan’s expression darkened. ‘I saw an army… laying siege to the throne room.’

‘Our father’s great work has failed and the terrors of Old Night have been made manifest. We must resist them, Vulkan.’

Dorn turned to face the gunship, raising his voice so he would be heard as it came in to land.

‘We must endure.’

The gunship took them across the Petitioner's City, rising slowly through the agglomerated strata of the Palace.

Through the rain-spattered armourglass of the gunship's viewing block, Vulkan saw weapon towers, ablative armour, mass augur stations and barrack houses. Troops lined every parapet and battlement.

Mobs thronged the streets, milling around in fear and confusion, listening to the demagogues and doomsayers who had risen up like weeds in an untended garden. Enforcers jostled with the crowds, obscured by acid rain. Smoke stacks belched corrosive fumes into the atmosphere from the thousands of manufactorums labouring day and night to produce shells and ammunition.

'I know what you are thinking,' said Dorn, quietly looking into the shadows as if the answer to a particularly perplexing problem lurked there. 'It was beautiful once.'

'It will be again,' said Vulkan, regarding his brother. 'And its glory remains undiminished.'

'What times we live in, brother.'

Vulkan looked back out into the night. Lightning cracked silently in the distance, briefly illuminating the forbidding shadow of the Tower of Heroes. How long before the bell at its summit began to toll? And once begun, when would it end?

'Are you and I alone amongst our father's loyal sons to have returned to the Throneworld?'

'The Khan is here, roaming who knows where.'

Dorn scowled at the thought, Jaghatai so different in nature to the redoubtable Lord of the VII.

'He has a stallion's heart, brother. Wild and untempered.'

'You mean wilful,' Dorn griped.

Vulkan laughed and found the act profoundly saddening when he realised this moment was but a fleeting one, and soon the darkness would encroach again.

Dorn was right – they must endure.

'Do you think he'll reach Terra?' Vulkan asked, not referring to the Khan now.

'I know our brother,' said Dorn. 'Horus is as tenacious as he is ruthless. He will reach Terra. And I will stop him. Even conquerors are blunted against my shield.'

'Would you kill him, Rogal?'

Dorn's gaze was lost to memory and Vulkan suddenly had the feeling this was a question he had already answered, though one perhaps asked more broadly.

Could you kill one of your brothers?

His eyes met Vulkan's, hard and icy.

'Could you? Could you kill one of them if they were beneath your sword?'

'I had the chance,' said Vulkan, 'but could not bring myself to do it.'

Dorn turned away, disgusted, though it was hard to tell if the emotion was directed at his brother or himself.

'I would kill him. I would kill all of them for what they've done, and gladly bear the guilt of it.'

An uncomfortable silence fell upon them after that, only broken several hours later when they came in sight of a landing pad that would lead Vulkan to the Inner Palace confines.

In the distance, the Tower of Hegemon loomed and Vulkan watched as they made their slow descent, the rain still lashing.

A cohort of golden-armoured Custodians stood waiting at the edge of the landing pad, following the gunship down with the hot glow of their retinal lenses. Guardian spears glittered in their gauntleted fists.

'Are they to be my escorts now, brother?' asked Vulkan, looking over his shoulder at his brother and shouting to be heard above the raucous cry of the engines.

Dorn nodded.

'I have to return to the Bhab Bastion.' His expression tightened. 'And my Legion and I are not needed in the Imperial Dungeon.'

Vulkan grasped Dorn's shoulder.

'I am glad you came, Rogal. I am glad we got to see each other again.'

Dorn looked stern, some vestige of his last words still lingering, but a little of his reserve diminished at this last act of compassion and he clasped Vulkan's outstretched hand.

'I hope it is not the last time,' he said, and they parted as the gunship's side hatch ratcheted open and Vulkan leapt out into the rising storm.

Upon the landing pad, Vulkan gave a curt salute as the gunship rose again, ferrying Dorn away.

After it was lost to the night and the clawing spires of the Palace, he turned to his escorts.

One of them stepped forwards, the red horsehair plume of his helm fluttering wildly in the breeze.

'Lord Vulkan,' he intoned, 'the Sigillite awaits your presence in the Sanctum

Imperialis.’

Vulkan nodded. ‘I expected nothing less. Lead on.’

THIRTY-TWO

The Gate, its guardian eternal

The long processional that led to the Gate stretched for more than a kilometre. The Custodians marched through this grand hall in silence, flanked on either side by a legion of banners and war standards commemorating the many regiments of Terra and the Imperium. Amongst this sea of colour and veneration stood the proud symbols of mythic beasts of Old Earth, the gryphonne and wyvorn, the lion-headed manticore, the Imperial eagle. Rendered in silver, gold and bronze, hung with gleaming medals or victory pennants, the banners stirred the heart and humbled false pride.

Here was a legacy of war and conquest, of Unity.

Helots moved solemnly amongst the banners, swinging censers that trailed smoke. Strange winged servitor creatures flew languidly overhead, the tolling of their metal bells a doleful echo in the vast vaulted chamber.

And at the end of this promenade of old glories stood the Eternity Gate.

A soaring edifice, over six hundred and twenty metres high, its gilded face depicted the Emperor plunging his spear into the denizens of Old Night. A blazing sun framed the Master of Mankind's countenance, a galactic tapestry rendered in eye-aching detail in the background.

Two great Titans stood watch at either side of the Gate, looming and belligerent, arrayed in the panoply of the Legio Ignatum of Mars.

As Vulkan and his escort closed to within ten metres, the Gate began to part and a thin figure, quite ordinary looking but radiating power, stepped from the darkness beyond.

He wore the robes common to any Terran bureaucrat and leaned heavily on an eagle-topped staff. His eyes flashed beneath a hood which shrouded his face in

shadows.

Vulkan bowed deeply to the Sigillite.

‘Lord Malcador…’

Malcador dismissed the Custodians, who returned the way they had come to stand sentinel with the Imperial Fists.

‘Your sons will join the wall guard and fight with honour, I am certain,’ uttered the Sigillite.

‘And is that all you saw when you looked into my mind, my lord?’ asked Vulkan.

Malcador did not answer, though Vulkan could tell he had seen something of the horror the primarch had witnessed on the other side of the Imperial Dungeon.

‘Come, Vulkan,’ he said instead, and passed back through the Gate.

Once they were both through, it shut behind them.

Past the darkness that lurked beyond the Gate, Vulkan met the army he had seen retreating back to the Palace. Few remained from the number he had witnessed, and those who did looked battered and beyond weary. Yet their ranks made ready, facing the shimmering portal, now sealed, that had led to the place beyond.

‘I saw it,’ he said to Malcador. ‘I saw what they faced.’

‘It is hell,’ said Malcador, without breaking step. ‘Hell given form, and it seeks to undo all of this and enslave mankind to its will.’

And sat before the portal was his father, the Emperor, upon the Golden Throne of Terra.

Vulkan felt the urge to bow before His glory, so achingly pure and bright was the refulgence of the figure upon the Throne. He reached for the talisman around his neck, and experienced a momentary spike of revelation.

The Emperor’s voice resounded like a pealing bell or clarion horn, a host of triumphal flutes or the beating of a thousand war drums. It was all of it, and none of it, and Vulkan staggered as he heard it.

+My son…+

Vulkan wept, and sank to his knees, head bowed in supplication. ‘Father…’

Though the words resonated in Vulkan’s head, the Emperor’s lips did not move. He remained still, hands clenched around the arms of the Throne, feet set firmly, His expression one of dire and abject concentration.

Vulkan realised He held the portal shut. By His will alone were the daemons kept at bay.

‘I have returned, father. As you willed it.’

+Then rise, Vulkan. And do what it is I brought you back from death to do.+

Vulkan did as bidden, though with difficulty. The mere presence of his enthroned father gnawed at his resolve. An immense weight resisted him, and he fought to overcome it.

He heard the Sigillite’s voice, distant but urgent, as Vulkan gained the first step that led to the Throne’s dais. Through blazing light and the burning intensity of the Emperor’s unfettered glory, he thought he saw his father blink. A momentary gesture, near imperceptible, silenced Malcador’s protests.

Vulkan would never know what passed between them, but he recognised its toll upon the Emperor, who grimaced with the immense effort.

Every step brought greater pain, both physical and mental, as Vulkan relived every one of his many deaths. A lightning storm of endings flashed before him, each thunderous crack a blow that drew a wince of barely suppressed agony from the Lord of Drakes.

And still he rose, another step, and then another.

Close now, he saw the strain upon his father’s face, and realised what it had cost to hold the way open for him and his sons, though they had been unable to take it and had instead come via a different road, one that led to the earth itself.

And at last, with the talisman of seven hammers in his hand and the Throne within his reach, did Vulkan *see*.

And the horror of it, what his father had used him to create, the entire purpose for his resurrection, came crashing in.

He shut his eyes, the light burning, and when he opened them again he was no longer on Terra.

He had returned to Nocturne.

A man faced him, slighter of frame and wearing a strange garb that put Vulkan in mind of a Grekan Myrmidone of Old Earth. A long tan cloak swept across his right shoulder, pinned at his breast with a circular bronze stud. Around his waist was a thick belt of pteruges, and he wore a gold breastplate sculpted to resemble a man’s naked musculature. He had no helm, instead preferring a silver circlet. His dark hair flowed like a mane of jet. Torcs ringed his arms and he wore vambraces and shin guards in the same style as his breastplate.

‘You are the Outlander,’ said Vulkan, his own attire and armour that of a Nocturnean tribesman.

‘This is how we met, my son. Do you remember it?’ asked the Outlander.

Vulkan frowned. ‘Why have you done this, father? I have fashioned

something… abominable.’

The Outlander’s gaze flicked to the talisman around His son’s neck and then back to Vulkan.

‘Do you recall what I said to you, as we sat here and looked out upon these very sands?’

The great expanse of the Pyre Desert stretched out before them, harsh and unforgiving but beautiful in its way.

Vulkan did not answer, and he did not meet his father’s eye. Heat haze made the desert tremble, even with the sun setting and painting the sand a fiery red.

‘I said your destiny was a great one,’ the Outlander went on. ‘And I said–’

‘That you needed me more than I knew, more than perhaps I would ever know.’ Vulkan shook his head, a grimace of denial set upon his face. ‘But this… *How* can I do this?’

‘You are the earth, my son, its fire and solidity, that is how.’

‘And the great flame that it will unleash if the Throne fails, if *you* fail?’

Vulkan felt a firm hand upon his shoulder and heard the darkening of his father’s mood in His words.

‘It will consume the Palace and all of Terra. The Throneworld will burn.’

A sharp turn brought Vulkan eye to eye with the Outlander. Incredulity warred with duty on his face.

‘To deny it to my brother?’

‘No, my son,’ said the Emperor sadly, the Master of Mankind standing before him now. ‘Not to deny it to Horus but to Chaos, and to strike a blow against their forces the like of which they will never recover from.’

‘To win the war you would sacrifice Terra?’

‘If Terra falls and Horus takes it then we have lost anyway, and all of mankind will suffer.’

Vulkan looked down at the talisman in his hand and fought the urge to crush it, though he knew it would not yield to even his strength.

‘I am sorry, my son,’ said the Emperor. ‘I needed to hide it from you, what you had created and what would be wrought by it in my name.’

‘Has this… Has it always been within me, the capacity to fashion such a thing?’

‘Tell me, my son, why did you destroy your great works and send the others where no one might ever find them?’

‘I feared they would be put to ill use, and what they could unleash.’

‘Which is why it had to be you. It has ever been within you, Vulkan, and I hoped such a day would not come to pass that I had need of it… I hoped for a

great many things,' He said sadly. 'Your death, your *true* death and resurrection, brought forth what you needed to fashion the talisman. All of your pain, the suffering of your Legion, it has led us to this point.'

Vulkan met his father's gaze, defiant.

'And if I refuse?'

'You will not refuse, for you still believe in hope that I will prevail, that Horus will be stopped and the war will end. But you are also pragmatic, and know that this must be done in case hope fails us in the end.'

And as before the light grew around the Emperor, radiating from His skin and Vulkan shut his eyes lest he was struck blind.

Upon opening them, he was once more before the Throne, his father's unswerving gaze upon him. Willing him. Urging him.

Vulkan wrenched the talisman from his neck and reached out with it towards the Throne. A small circular aperture presented itself and without further hesitation he pressed the talisman into it. In the moment of connection, Vulkan saw a sea of flame rise up to engulf the Tower of Hegemon, to swallow the Tower of Heroes and all the mighty spires of the Palace. It spread, this conflagration within his mind, sweeping across the Panpacific, Ursh, Hy Brasil, Ind and Nordafrik, to every region until nothing remained but ash.

The talisman would magnify the power of the Throne to unleash cataclysm.

Vulkan blinked and it was gone, a part of the great mechanism, impossible to remove and forever waiting.

Staggering back down the steps, his immortal flesh reknit itself, his body regaining its vitality, until, by the time he reached the bottom, he was without injury.

Vulkan retreated from his father and the Throne.

His eyes went to the portal. It would fail – his father had seen it, and Vulkan knew what lay beyond. He stepped back until he stood in the shadow of the Eternity Gate and held *Urdrakule* across his body in both hands, an eternal guardian.

'Let them come…'

EPILOGUE

Fates, rewritten

Eldrad Ulthran sagged in his chair. His private chambers aboard the ship were modest but offered a modicum of solitude. He wore a simple black robe of light cloth and had divested himself of his armour and staff, his witchblade placed in a sealed vault.

The path had taken much out of him, perhaps even some mote of his soul, but he told himself it had been worth it. Fate had been rewritten. Eldrad wished dearly he could tell Lathsarial of it, but he had felt the other seer's death long before his journey had ended.

And so he spoke to no one of what he had done. He confessed nothing to the other farseers of Ulthwé. They had not aided him, but it was still his craftworld and the time had come to be reunited with it.

Much remained uncertain, beyond Eldrad's power to influence further.

The human, Grammaticus, had a role yet to play, as did the Bearer of the Word, Narek. Each still would need to find his part.

Feeling weary beyond his years, Eldrad closed his eyes and let the vision come. He watched the future unspool before him, a mere observer to fate, a passenger to destiny. He watched the ending of the war and he saw what followed, some ten thousand years hence.

And he wept.

The cell's walls felt cold to the touch. Voices echoed in the corridor beyond the door, which was locked and barred. The occupant of the cell had no knowledge of how he came to be there, but he had been beaten and his armour removed.

A fight had recently ended, one which he felt certain his captors had lost.

The lumen above the door glowed red and hazy in the clouded atmosphere. He smelled smoke, heard the report of distant gunfire.

Red turned to green. The door slid open, its locking bolts retracting, and a warrior in cobalt blue staggered in, a bolt pistol in his hand. A shot resounded, and the warrior fell, his chest blasted open.

Footsteps sounded on the metal deck underfoot. A second figure emerged in the narrow aperture of the cell doorway. The occupant had already stooped to retrieve the dead warrior's knife. The pistol had been empty. He need not have worried.

The second figure wore armour too, but crimson. Prayer parchment flickered, disturbed by the failing air recyclers of the starship.

'I've found another one,' he said in perfect Colchisian, calling to someone out of sight. Then he turned his attention on the occupant.

'You are of the Word,' he said, approving, and nodded. 'That is good. We are bound for Terra, to fight at the primarch's side. Lorgar has decreed it. Horus will march on the Throneworld at last. What is your name, legionary?'

And the occupant smiled, for he saw in all of this a design, a thread.

'Narek,' he said, his eyes cold. 'Barthusa Narek.'

AFTERWORD

Every journey has its end… This phrase rings oh-so-true when considering where we are in the narrative of the Horus Heresy. Within sight now are the walls of the Emperor's Palace, as the grandest possible stage in the entire saga makes ready for its dramatic opening and thrilling final bow.

For me, the ending that most concerns my contribution to the Horus Heresy is happening now. In fact, it *has* happened. This is it. This book you hold in your hand is the very end.

Through his many trials: physical, mental, moral and spiritual (Konrad ensured he faced them all), Vulkan has reached the end of his story in what is considered the 'open period' of the Horus Heresy, prior to the colossal finale of the Siege.

I've lived with Vulkan as a character in my head – as a story I had the honour and privilege of telling – for over six years. I feel a profound attachment to him, to his fate, to his story, and so it feels only right that I use this afterword to talk about that and the journey it has taken me on.

I hope you'll forgive the indulgence.

It's hope, I've always felt, that Vulkan represents. It's fair to say that he's not considered to be one of the 'main' primarchs. He's not the poster child for either the Imperium or Chaos. He doesn't have wings, nor is he possessed of a serpent's tail or an undeniable charisma that could bring the galaxy to its knees; he isn't a feral wolf king or an unstable rage-gladiator. Vulkan was already regarded as one of the 'others', only worthy of remark because he was one of three primarchs who got royally brutalised, along with their Legions, at Isstvan V.

The massacre was more famous than the massacred.

Then.

Not so much now.

Vulkan *had* a story. His supposed 'death' was a mystery, his subsequent reappearance at the Second Founding even more so. I wanted to know what had happened to him. I cared about his journey. I wanted other people to care too.

Vulkan is the epitome of hope. He's also – with the exception of Guilliman who has arch-statecraft to fall back on – probably the one primarch who could easily adapt to a universe without endless war. He's arguably the most human and yet one of the least human-looking, (aside from the one with the angel wings… oh, and pre-Chaos, of course).

He believes in humanity. He cares about humankind. He is a true hero, and in part that's what *Old Earth* represents. Showing Vulkan as the hero.

In *Vulkan Lives*, he played the victim, the dupe. Yes, he was defiant. Yes, he triumphed against the odds and escaped the trap set for him, learning in the process that *he could never die*, but he was always on the back foot.

Deathfire was about Vulkan's Legion, his sons, and what they would do when faced with the loss of their father and the complex belief that he could, somehow, return from the dead. Vulkan is in the novel and his presence is felt throughout, but as a character he's restricted to the odd weird dream sequence and a 'fist pumping the air in triumph' cameo right at the end.

In *Old Earth*, Vulkan finally gets to shine. He also begins to understand his purpose, and as observers to his fate, we get to see his destiny satisfyingly fulfilled.

No longer just one of the others. I wanted to make Vulkan's story pertinent, for it to matter. That ending, that reveal of what his true purpose is could only happen on Terra and thus that is where his story concludes. The chapters set on the Throneworld were perhaps the toughest I had to write across all three novels and all three novellas.

It would be remiss of me, though, to say that *Old Earth* was just Vulkan's story. There is a very significant chunk of the book devoted to the Iron Hands, in particular a certain Shadrak Meduson and the fate of the so-called 'Shattered Legions'.

At one point, I remember, during one of the Horus Heresy planning meetings, there was a mind to have an entire novel solely devoted to the Iron Hands. It was going to be called *The Iron Tenth* (I admit, that's somewhat on the nose, but, hey, it's the Iron Hands).

I'm sure we could have easily filled a novel with a wall-to-wall Iron Hands

saga, but as time marched on and the Horus Heresy series began to grow longer in the tooth, a sense of urgency that wasn't there at the start began to manifest. Momentum became important, and the question that was so often posed in these meetings of far greater minds than my own changed from 'what can we do next?' to 'what must we now do before the end?' So it was then that plans for *The Iron Tenth* were jettisoned. It was only a little while later, as Imperium Secundus began to take shape in the series following *The Unremembered Empire*, and Vulkan had been returned to Nocturne, that Laurie suggested I could tackle the really meaty part of *The Iron Tenth* (i.e. Meduson's fate and that of the Shattered Legions) in *Old Earth*. His suggestion was for a two-pronged storyline, one that both served as a finale in terms of Vulkan's journey as well as giving the Iron Hands some closure.

I had to ditch some things. There are parts of Vulkan's journey that I'd planned that you'll probably never get to read. I had an entire subplot that would have incorporated the ageing Thunder Warriors on Terra, and the sections in the webway would have lasted longer.

I have no doubt at all in my mind that the approach we went for in the end was the better option and makes for the better story. Meduson's tale is a tragic one, as is the story of his Legion, but in many ways it led to Vulkan's triumph and says something about the cruel dichotomy of the universe which they inhabit. I like the symmetry of that. I like how they both get to be heroes in the end, but with completely different outcomes.

I've never written a more challenging book than *Old Earth*. It incorporates many different settings, and balances two hefty storylines and then weaves them together. It has an absolute beast of a subplot that embraces a lot of big ideas about the universe and ultimately sets up some pretty significant story beats that will get realised on that big stage I mentioned earlier.

It also ties in to each of the three novellas: *Promethean Sun*, *Scorched Earth* and *Sons of the Forge*. Maybe one day the whole damn saga will be bound up together, in the appropriate order, and you can read it as I envisaged it.

I won't claim to have known every detail, or how it would end up, but that scene with Vulkan right at the end, the hero, the guardian, both saviour and destroyer? I've had that pegged since my 40K novel *Salamander*.

Six years is a long time, and there's a sense of the bittersweet about finally reaching the end. I'll miss Vulkan, though I'd never say never to seeing him again.

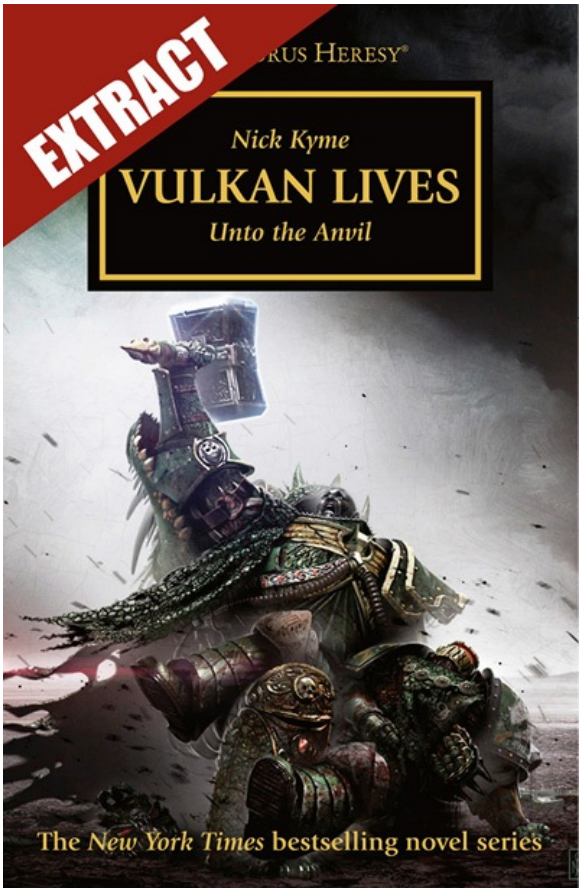
Perhaps during the future? A far future. Now wouldn't that be something?

Nick Kyme
Nottingham
June 2017

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick Kyme is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Old Earth*, *Deathfire*, *Vulkan Lives* and *Sons of the Forge*, the novellas *Promethean Sun* and *Scorched Earth*, and the audio dramas *Censure* and *Red-Marked*. His novella *Feat of Iron* was a *New York Times* bestseller in the Horus Heresy collection, *The Primarchs*. Nick is well known for his popular Salamanders novels, including *Rebirth*, the Space Marine Battles novel *Damnos*, and numerous short stories. He has also written fiction set in the world of Warhammer, most notably the Time of Legends novel *The Great Betrayal* and the Age of Sigmar story 'Borne by the Storm', included in the novel *War Storm*. He lives and works in Nottingham, and has a rabbit.

An extract from Vulkan Lives.



Traoris was described by some as a *blessed* world. Blessed by whom or what was open to interpretation. The facts that were known were simply these. In the year 898 of the 30th millennium of the Imperial calendar, a being came to Traoris who was known as the Golden King.

Hailed as a liberator, he banished the dark cults that ruled before his coming. He slew them with sword and storm, an army of knights at his command that were both magnificent and terrifying. The cabal of sorcerer-lords that the Golden King vanquished had enslaved the Traorans, a people who had not known peace or freedom for many centuries, their ancestors having ventured from Old Earth long ago. Alone, isolated during the time of Old Night, Traoris fell victim to a primordial evil. Sin made the minds of weaker men eager vessels for this darkness and only glorious light would remove it.

And so it was that the Golden King banished darkness, preaching freedom and enlightenment. He touched this world with his mere presence. He *blessed* it.

Many years passed, and between the Golden King's departure and the recolonisation that followed, Traoris was slowly transformed. Gone were the bastions of the sorcerer-lords, great factories and mills rising in their stead. Industry came to Traoris and its people.

Eight cities stood upon its grey earth, built upon the ruins of the old, their tenements teeming with workers. Anwey, Umra, Ixon, Vorr, Lotan, Kren, Orll and Ranos – they were islands of civilisation, divided by many kilometres of inhospitable ash desert and storm-lashed lightning fields, raised up where seams of ore coveted by Mars were in their greatest concentrations.

Yes, Traoris was described by some as a blessed world. But not by any who lived there.

Though she knew in her heart it was futile, Alantea ran. It was raining hard, and had been ever since the ships of ebony and crimson had been spotted in the sky

over Ranos. Underfoot, the rain-lashed street was slick. She had fallen twice already and her knee throbbed dangerously with the past impacts.

Alantea had been working a manufactorum shift, so was only wearing green-grey overalls and a thin cotton shirt darkened from white to grey by manual labour. A plastek coat kept out the worst of the rain, but parted as she ran. Her hair was drenched and hung down in front of her face in blonde clumps, obscuring her vision in the dark.

Phosphor lamps hissed and spat as the raindrops touched them. Shadows clawed away from the dingy light, revealing square structures of grey granite beneath them. The whole city was grey, from the fog that oozed from the foundry stacks to the stone slabs under Alantea's feet. Ranos was dark iron, it was industry and strength, it was an engine that ran on muscle and blood.

It was also her home.

The phosphor lamps glared like beacons, hurting Alantea's eyes. But she welcomed them, because they would lead her to the square.

If she could just reach Cardinal Square…

Heavy footfalls drummed behind her, a noisy refrain against the frenzied beating of her heart, and as she turned down a side street she dared to glance back.

A shadow. Just a shadow, that's all she really saw.

But she'd seen these shadows tear old Yulli apart, gut her dutiful overseer like he was swine and leave his steaming entrails on the ground for him to look upon as he died. The others had died soon after. Throaty barks, accompanied by harsh muzzle flashes from thick, black guns, had ripped them apart. Nothing was left, not even bodies. The manufactorum floor a bloodbath; its various machineries destroyed.

Alantea had bolted for the gate to the yard. She'd considered taking one of the hauler trucks, until one of the half-tracks exploded, chewed up by a heavy cannon. So instead she ran. Now they chased her, those shadows. Never fast nor urgent, but always just a few steps away.

Fear was in the air that night. Talk was rife amongst the workers that men had been found and arrested in the culverts. Rumours abounded of strange doings, of ritual suicides and other 'acts'. The clavigers had apparently found a missing girl with the men, or at least her remains. But what was worse was that the men were just ordinary citizens, workers of Ranos just like her.

So when the manufactorum was hit, paranoia and terror were already infecting its workers. The panic had been terrifying. But a different kind of fear seized

Alantea now, one fuelled by the desperate desire to escape it and the belief that something far worse than death waited for her if she didn't.

This district of the city was a warren, full of avenues crowded over with dirty tenement blocks that shouldered up against warehouses and silos. Alleyways and conduits gave way to labyrinthine side streets where even the rats lost their bearings. Except she couldn't lose them, not her shadows. They had the scent of prey.

Ducking around a corner, Alantea sank to her haunches as she tried to catch a breath. It was tempting to believe she was safe now, or to give up and relinquish the chase. The city was quiet, overly so, and she feared then that she was the last surviving inhabitant, that Ranos was extinct but for her tiny life spark. She'd seen no sign of the clavigers, no dramatic call to arms from the shield-wardens. No response at all. What enemy force in all existence could achieve such a feat of absolute subjugation with barely any resistance?

A harsh, grating voice speaking in a language she didn't understand got Alantea to her feet. She guessed he was talking to the others. The thought of a noose tightening ever so slightly around her pale, slender neck sprang unbidden into her mind. They were closer than before, Alantea knew it instinctively. She thought of her father, and the slow, cancerous death that awaited him. She remembered better days, still poor, but tempered with happiness when her father had been whole. He needed medicine; without it… A few more precious moments with her father was all she wanted. In the end, that's all anyone ever really wants, just a little longer. But it was never enough. It was part of the human condition, to want to live, and when faced with our mortal end men rail against it to further that desire. It galvanised Alantea now. Cardinal Square wasn't far. Another hundred metres, maybe fewer.

Dredging up whatever stamina she had left, Alantea ran.

Even with her injured knee she covered the last few metres steadily and at pace.

Bursting into Cardinal Square, gasping for breath, she saw *him*.

Rendered in gold – holding aloft a sceptre of command that would later be given to the Lord Excavator General of Traoris, patron of Ranos and the other seven worker-cities – he looked magnificent. He had come to her world, set foot in this very spot after the liberation, after the Traorans had been freed. He had spoken and all had tried to listen. Alantea was not born then. She had neither seen the one they came to know as the Golden King, nor heard his speech during the triumph, but sitting upon her father's shoulders as he remembered back to what his father and his father before that told him of the liberation, she had felt

the Golden King's power and benevolence.

Something had changed since that day with her father. Standing in Cardinal Square now, she no longer felt that reassurance. It was as if something had arisen to challenge it and was even now worming away at all it represented. She could not say why. Perhaps it was instinct, that unfathomable intuition that only the female of the species possessed. All she knew was that a different blessing had fallen upon Ranos, one that felt far from benevolent, and its nexus was focused on the square.

Five points ran off from the square – though to call it such was a colloquial misnomer for it was actually pentagonal – including the one where Alantea was standing. At each of the other four she saw an armoured form blocking her escape. Phantoms at first, shadows, they advanced slowly out of the darkness. Edged in silver phosphor light their movements seemed almost syncopated and inhuman.

Turning back, realising her mistake, Alantea didn't know she'd been stabbed until the feeling left her legs and she collapsed. Strong, armoured hands caught her before she fell and she looked up into the face of her rescuer. He was handsome, despite the strange script gilding his cheekbones and the exposed areas of his scalp that hurt Alantea's eyes to look at. His black hair was short, shorn close to the scalp, and ended in a sharp widow's peak over his forehead.

His eyes were pitying, but it was a cold pity, one usually reserved for the culling of cattle no longer fit for the herd.

Alantea whispered, using up a good measure of her courage to speak, 'Let me go.'

The armoured warrior, clad in wine-red plate, festooned with chains and scroll work, slowly shook his head.

'Now, now, my dear,' he said, soothing, but seizing Alantea's arms when she struggled, 'that's quite enough of that.' He caressed her cheek with a long metal nail he wore on one of his gauntlets, drawing a thin line of tiny bloody jewels across her skin.

Whimpering like the animal he regarded her as, Alantea tried to answer, but the warrior shushed her, holding the bloodstained finger up to his slightly curved lips. Exhausted, unaware of the internal trauma her body was experiencing as a result of the knife wound, Alantea was powerless to prevent her head from lolling back. Vision fogging, she saw the Golden King, upside down and lashed by the rain.

As it ran across his face and down his cheeks, it looked as if he were crying. In

her delirium she wondered what could have upset him so, what could have instilled in a being such as he such profound remorse.

Chains were being looped around the statue by the other warriors that had entered the square. They heaved, a single gargantuan effort, and brought the Golden King down amid the dirt and the blood.

'Don't struggle, you're bleeding…' the warrior holding her told Alantea benevolently, before his tone grew darker, 'and we must not waste a single drop.'

They were in deep, as far down into the catacombs as it was possible to go. The steady thrum of rock-cutters and the heavy bang of blasting charges was a constant and insistent drone and could be heard in the ruins above. It had been a battlefield, or part of one, frozen in time at the point of victory by order of the ruler of this world. The last bastion of anti-Imperial resistance destroyed by a storm of psychic lightning. Nothing had changed since the fortress had fallen. The ruins had been left as they were all those years ago. Untouched. They were a reminder of a glorious past, a place of commemoration and veneration.

Sebaton had violated the sanctity of that, besmirched it with hanging phosphor lamps, industry-grade digging servitors and the cluster of spades, shovels, cutters and excavation kit now strewn about the place. It played little on his conscience. Reality was, his conscience was so blighted already that such minor sacrilege would barely register.

Archaeology was not his strong suit, yet he could play the role, adopt the persona of Caeren Sebaton as needed. He knew they were close. He could feel it, just as he could feel the slowly deepening inevitability of what would follow their discovery and where, ultimately, it would lead him.

Dust thronged the air, making it hard to see in the dirt and the darkness even with the lamps. Surrounded by the reliquary of a time long past, Sebaton began to feel old. He looked up at the cavernous opening above, at the wide cleft of tunnel through which they had bored down to reach the catacombs, at the ramp down which they had ferried their equipment, and felt the desperate urge to climb. He wanted to be in the light, a keeper of shadows and lies no more. He resisted, his pragmatism far outweighing his whimsy, and asked, 'How much farther, Varteh?'

The ex-Lucifer Black glanced up from the dig site where a pair of servitors were chewing up rock with their manifold tools, a tech-adept looking on.

'We're close.'

He spoke through a crackly short-gain vox-link, patched from a unit in his

rebreather and received by the ear-bud attached to Sebaton's own mask. This far down, this much dust, both men would have choked to death by now. The rest of Varteh's team wore them too. Two men, ostensibly for security, flanked the dig perimeter. Both had lascarbines slung casually over their shoulders. Varteh carried a fat, military-grade autopistol in a holster on his left hip. He also had a long flensing knife strapped to his right boot.

All three men wore simple desert tan fatigues, bleached almost white by the dust, and cracked-leather jackets over plain grey vests. Varteh also wore a grey cowl that covered his ears and came up just over his chin. Sebaton could just make out his eyes through his goggles. They were hard; for Lucifer Blacks, even those who no longer served in the Army, were hard men.

Sebaton knew this from experience.

He was similarly attired, but wore a long damson-red duster coat with black tanker boots that went halfway up his shins. Sebaton's fatigues were deep tan, pleated at the edges like an equestrian's. He only carried one visible weapon, a snub-nose flechette pistol that fired tiny razor-edged discs and sat snugly in a shoulder holster concealed by his coat.

Glancing again at the opening that led out of the catacombs, Sebaton beckoned Varteh over.

His tone was insistent, 'How long, Varteh?'

'You expecting trouble?' Varteh jerked his chin at the opening. Falling rain sparkled in the light. 'Nothing is coming after us, is it? I can only protect you if you tell me what it is you need protection from.'

Sebaton met the ex-Lucifer's gaze, and smiled warmly. 'Anything I'm hiding is for your benefit, believe me, Varteh.'

Varteh frowned.

'Something amiss with that?' asked Sebaton.

'Not at all. But ever since we met I've been wondering something about you. When I was with the Army, I travelled,' he said, 'Met a lot of men from a lot of different regiments, lot of different places. Until I made your acquaintance, I thought my knowledge of accents was fairly broad but I can't place yours. It's unique and yet also familiar. Not really one accent, but several. Therefore I'm wondering, where is it from?'

Sebaton's smile faded. 'A bit of here, a bit of there. Does it matter? You're being well paid for your services. And I thought Lucifer Blacks were meant to obey and not ask questions.'

Now it was Varteh's turn to smile.

‘I did, that’s why I’m in this shit hole with you.’ Varteh let it go. ‘Fair enough. We all have our secrets, I suppose. Yours, I suspect, are many.’

‘It’s because you’re a shrewd man that I hired you, Varteh.’ Sebaton looked back up at the opening.

Varteh took a step towards him and whispered, ‘What’s coming, Sebaton? What is this all about?’

Sebaton was staring. ‘What it’s always been about, Varteh. Weapons.’ He twisted the small ornate ring he wore on one finger, before returning his gaze to the ex-Lucifer. ‘Keep digging.’

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